

THE CONTEXT OF BHAKTI POETRY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Its Inception, Cultural Encounter and Impact

With Reference to the Work of Kabir and Nanak

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INTRODUCTION

It is more than two centuries since the English language established itself in pockets of urban India and became popular with the upwardly mobile segment of Indian society, who soon perceived it as the language of progress. Ever since then, a lot of literature (both original and translated,) has been produced in English. During this process of cultural/ linguistic assimilation and transition, a fractured perception of the self and of one's own literary heritage was bound to afflict poets who were less rooted and therefore swept away by the English literary tradition, which they seem to have gladly adopted as their surrogate mother. The poetry they wrote was lacking in varying degrees in Indian character and identity. It spelt a complete departure from the continuing forms and traditions of Indian poetry writing. As C. D. Narasimhaiah writes

Our writers have perhaps done well by contemporary English standards but not created their own identity. Is it because they have not discovered their cultural identity?

Referring to the legacy of Indian mystic and devotional poetry, he says:

.....One is not so naive as to want them to revive that kind of poetry, but they can't afford to forget that both folk and formal poetry in this country has been functional, a humanizing and spiritualizing force, never a mere instrument of pleasure that it now threatens to be. ...many of the younger poets can hardly be said to belong to the tradition, let alone continue it in a significant way. (*The Swan And The Eagle : Essays On Indian English Literature* 41)

In the recent few decades there has been a partial coming back, an attempt to forge the gap that exists between English poetry and the rest of the Indian experience. The process however has been very slow and erratic.

Scholarship is agreed upon the fact that there is little "spiritual continuity" in verse written in English in the nineteenth and twentieth century India. It also agrees that "by losing tradition we lose hold on the present" (C. D. Narasimhaiah, *Anthology Of Commonwealth Poetry* 3). This new reality of the last two centuries, contrasts rudely with (and even misleads the limited reader from,) the Indian tradition of poetry writing

which from the *Upanishads* onwards, has tended to be highly mystical and charged. An attempt is made here to examine briefly, the career and concerns of Bhakti poetry from its inception in eighth century Tamilnadu to its upward course through the tenth century Karnataka, through Maharashtra in the thirteenth century and its spread thereafter to the entire North, West and East of India. By the sixteenth century Bhakti had covered almost every corner of India. It was like a national movement, enriching and inspiring its people and cementing differences wherever it went. This thesis therefore is a practical exercise in examining (in English translation,) the merit of Bhakti poets like Kabir and Nanak, whom we regard as the climax of India's earliest movement of modern thought, moved as it was by deep spiritual insights, a genuine concern for socio-political issues and by an assertion of human rights.

There are many English translations of Kabir's poetry varying in their literary merit. There is Rabindranath Tagore's *One Hundred Songs Of Kabir*, G. N. Das's *Mystic Songs Of Kabir*, and Krishna P. Bahadur's *A New Look At Kabir*, with a substantially extensive (and at times simplistic,) introduction. The two texts that I have used extensively for quoting Kabir's verse are (i) *The Bijak Of Kabir*, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, and (ii) Nirmal Dass's *Songs Of Kabir From The Adi Granth*. As William Walsh has mentioned in *Bhakti In Kabir*, Kabir wrote little or nothing by himself. Since the transcription of his verse was left to his disciples, it led to the creeping in of many distortions and variations at the time when it was actually transcribed. Included among the main sources of Kabir's poetry are, the *Bijak* (the sacred book of the Kabir Panth in U.P. / Bihar), the *Kabir Granthavali* (compiled by the Dadu Dayal sect of Rajasthan), and the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs, compiled by Arjun Dev in 1604 A.D. Punjab. The *Adi Granth* is regarded as the oldest and most authentic collection of Kabir's verse since it is believed that these were collected by Nanak (Kabir's spiritual descendent), during his travels across the North of India, and later compiled by Guru Arjun Dev in 1604 A.D.

While there are many English translations of Kabir's verse to choose from, the scene with Nanak's poetry in English translation, is not so fortunate. A large portion of Nanak's verse exists only as religious scripture (along with that of other Sant poets,) in the *Adi Granth* – also known as the *Granth Sahib*. Secondly only those poems like the "Japji" and "Siddha Goshti", which are central to Sikh ideology have received the translator's attention. Among the standard translations of "Japji" are those by Sohan Singh (*The*

Seeker's Path), and by Osho-Rajneesh, *The True Name: Discourses Of Japji Sahib Of Guru Nanak Dev*, in two volumes. In the last two decades attempts have been made by some Sikh scholars to translate the entire *Adi Granth* literature into contemporary Punjabi, Hindi and English languages. The thrust of such translations however is pre-eminently theological than literary. To rectify their inherent lack I have therefore, either translated Nanak's poems afresh, or have edited the stanzas that I quote from Dr Manmohan Singh's English translation of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

The thesis also makes a sociological survey of the Bhakti movement from its genesis in eighth century India until Nanak in the sixteenth century North India. It attempts to survey the evolution of the Bhakti movement and the role it played, as it steered its course through historic crisis, ideological pressures and cultural invasions. The Bhakti movement was the phenomenal attempt of the marginalized segment (i.e. regional languages and literature and the lower castes and classes,) at decentralizing the hierarchy imposed by the Brahmin fraternity. The saints who led the reform movement were mystics and poets of a high order. From its very inception the Bhakti ideology was guided by a humanizing cosmopolitanism, an emotional fervor and a thirst for the divine essence and experience.

The thesis is divided into six chapters which are followed by a Conclusion, an Appendix and a Select Bibliography. At the end of each chapter is given a summary of what that chapter has tried to achieve. The first three chapters take an overview of the Bhakti movement and the socio-political factors that propelled it, from its inception in the eighth century Tamilnadu with the Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti cults, to the eleventh-twelfth century *Lingayats* of Karnataka, the *Warkari Panth* of Maharashtra in the thirteenth century, Ramananda's school which initiated Nirguna Bhakti in fourteenth century Central North India, and the Chaitanya school of Saguna Vaishnava Bhakti in Bengal and Orissa, which had a parallel following in the Saguna poets of Gujarat.

The genesis of Bhakti in the South was the logical fallout of its interaction with the North. The interaction led to a consequent brahminizing of the southern states and to the emergence of a rigidly caste-ridden society with oppressive policies towards the lower caste Shudras and Mlechchhas. The presence of popular and fast spreading religions like Jainism and Buddhism, had provided an opportune escape to the oppressed

masses, whose exodus into the Jain or Buddhist fold sent alarm bells ringing among the Brahmin community. The need to humanize and relax the restraints had been realized by some Brahmins. The cult of Vaishnava Bhakti was born at a time when Jain and Buddhist faiths were on the decline. The temple gates were thrown open and the lower castes were encouraged to join in the worship ritual which favored emotional fervour and devotion to God. Its pioneer poets (the twelve *Alvars*) were high-caste Brahmins who lent their verse for the purpose of devotional singing. As A. K. Ramanujan comments, their songs are "the forbears of later traditions of Vaishnava poetry, reaching as far as Chaitanya in sixteenth century Bengal and Tagore in our times. Characteristic pan-Indian themes find some of their first and finest expressions in the poetry of the Alvars.." (*Hymns For The Drowning* xiv/xv). The same holds true for the poetry of Shaiva Bhakti which was based on the dual principle of Shiva-Shakti (i.e. the male-female principle of energy).

According to R. Champakalakshmi in his essay titled "**Religion And Social Change In Tamil Nadu**", Shaiva Bhakti became more popular in the agrarian setup, subsuming under its fold the various Shakti cults (i.e. primitive local deities,) as continuing forms of worship. Thereafter, in the eleventh and twelfth century Karnataka, the Shaiva movement – known as the *Virashaiva* or *Lingayat* movement – gathered splendid momentum. It provided a platform to some extremely fine poetry, and drew an immense amount of participation from the lower classes. The *Lingayats* were outrightly iconoclastic, questioning age-old conventions, deconstructing ritual practice, inducing social reform and propagating a return to common sense and essence. Among the prominent Lingayat poets were Basavanna, Dasimayya, Allama Prabhu, and Mahadeviyakka. Shaivism in general, and Virashaivism even more so, was "a revolt from within." It was a revolt against both Hinduism and Jainism (the powerful competitor of Hinduism). As Ramanujan narrates in *Speaking Of Shiva* (translations of Virashaiva verse from Kannada,) the lives of Basavanna and Dasimayya were desperate struggles against both Brahminism and Jainism, and the verse they wrote, finds a parallel example in the poems of Kabir.

The rival movements of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, despite differences in myth and ritual, created and shared a special idiom, a stock of attitudes and themes and a common heritage alive to this day. A degree of liberality was induced in the social

structure, due to the more integrated and participatory nature of the two movements. Another milestone achieved by the Bhakti movement was the creation of an extensive literature in the vernacular languages. The Bhakti hymns had come to be chanted and sung in the temples. Thus a non-Sanskritic and a non-Brahminical religious literature which was also reformative in its import became central to Brahmin orthodoxy. On examining the thematic and stylistic continuities in the Bhakti movement from the seventh century onwards, Ramanujan comes to the conclusion that Bhakti as a phenomenon was closely linked with the development of regional vernacular languages and with that of the marginalized social segments. Exulting in its cosmopolitanism, he says:

like a lit fuse, the passion of Bhakti seems to spread from region to region, from century to century, quickening the religious impulse. Arising in particular regions, speaking the local spoken languages, it is yet inter-regional – both parochial and universal. Even modern urban Bhakti groups include in their hymnals, songs of several languages and ages.

(40)

It is therefore not surprising that from the **Upanishads** onwards, “a large number of similes and analogies” that have been “pressed into service”, thread through the Bhakti poetry and bind it in a continuous tradition of mystic verse writing. The Bhakti poets were largely vagabonds at heart : a native version of spirited intellectuals given to extensive travelling and debating

From here onwards the movement swiftly spreads upwards. By the thirteenth century, Maharashtra sported an impressive galaxy of saint poets. The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, under the aegis of Jnandev, took the form of the Vithoba cult (Vithoba meaning father Vitthal – regarded as a form of Vishnu). Vithoba, the black-coloured deity of Pandharpur, was worshipped by the pilgrims of the Warkari Panth, with whom it was a regular practice to journey to Pandharpur and back at least twice every year. A Warkari was one who made a *wari* – a round trip or a pilgrimage. Jnandev an outcaste Brahmin, was a born spiritual genius who wrote prolifically. In a short life-span of twenty one years, filled with intense struggle, he had composed the **Amritanubhava** (a major philosophical treatise), a large number of abhangas, (i e. religious poems), and an extensive poetic commentary on the **Bhagvad Gita** – the **Jnaneshwari**. All of his writings are held together by the central theme of Bhakti, signifying a genuine inner

evolution in the consciousness of being. As Prof. Fred Dallmayr observes in an unpublished essay on Jnandev, the Warkari movement was centered around, and guided by the life and works of Jnandev. It illustrated a just and humane approach to life and upheld the practice of castelessness, simplicity, religious egalitarianism, and a balancing of the spiritual quest with a householder's life.

There was Namdev – another pillar of the *Warkari* movement, who shared a deep friendship with Jnandev and later continued to bring to its fold an extraordinary number of mystic poets from all across Maharashtra. The poets hailed from a cross-section of society. There was a potter, a gardener, a barber, a banker, a beggar, and a *Mahar* among others. After a lull in the later half of the fifteenth century, the Warkari movement would resurge with Tukaram and Eknath in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, it would not be incorrect to say that Namdev carried to North India the ethos of the Warkari Panth. He settled down in Ghuman, a village in the Batala *tehsil* of the Gurdaspur district of Punjab, and spread the new faith over a twenty year long stay. According to McLeod (in *Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion*,) Namdev shares with Ramananda the onus of spreading a more evolved form of Bhakti in the North and Central India. He was also the first major poet of the school of Nirguna Bhakti. (Nirguna meaning, one without form and physical attributes. The school of Nirguna Bhakti perceives God as formless, while Saguna Bhakti attributes to God a physical form and believes in the theory of *avataravad* i.e. reincarnation).

The third chapter makes a sociological assessment of the fourteenth century North, East, and West of India, the inception of a spate of both Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti in the north, the settling down of Islam, and their consequent interaction at various levels. Scholarship on the influence of Sufism upon the Bhakti tradition is highly diverse in its conclusions, and thrives upon difference. Muhammad Hedayetullah in his *Kabir: The Apostle Of Hindu-Muslim Unity* is convinced that Bhakti mysticism was furthered by its contact with Islam. However his presumption that it was Sufism which initiated the Bhakti movement in the South (294), is quite ill-founded. The other extreme is W.H. McLeod, who reduces Sufi influence to an irrelevant amount of contribution. Tracing the obvious argument which establishes plenty of affinities between Nanak's thought and the Sufi concepts, McLeod dismisses the case of Sufi influence, saying:

The appearance is however misleading. Affinities certainly exist, but we cannot assume that they are necessarily the result of Sufi influence.

Other factors suggest that Sufism was at most a marginal influence, encouraging certain developments but in no case providing the actual source of a significant element. (158)

I would rather subscribe to the balanced line of thought that Romila Thapar adopts when she suggests in ***A History Of India***, Volume I, that Sufism did have a role to play in shaping the ethos of Bhakti in the fifteenth–sixteenth century North India, however subtle it may have been. This is true especially of Kabir and Nanak who were not trying to consciously bridge the gulf between Hindus and Muslims, but were in fact leading a new religious group in which God was not merely a re-modeled version of the concept of Rama or of Allah, but a new concept derived from the two existing religious forces.

The chapters four and five make a study of both Kabir and Nanak as mystic poets who carried further the concepts of worship, divinity, and raja yoga (yoga of the mind, involving meditation and a disciplined life-style), at the same time they wrote an extensive amount of verse dipped in reformist zeal and rigorous questioning. The poetry they wrote is priceless in its worth, decked as it is with the treasure of the mystic's inner wealth. An attempt is also made to assess the extent of external influence upon their work and to decode the semiotics of their highly figurative verse. While the chapter on Kabir unravels in some detail, the fabric of Hatha yoga and Sufism in Sant poetry; the thrust of the fifth chapter on Nanak is more futuristic. It is perhaps a first time attempt (in the scholarship of Nanak), to study Nanak individually as a poet, independent of the Sikh canon of *gurbani*. Nanak was the last of the major Sant poets in the tradition of Nirguna Bhakti. The thesis explores the implications of the Sant ethos as it translated into the new-found faith of the Sikh tradition. In the process of writing the chapter, I have also translated a number of Nanak's poems for the purpose of quoting; and have edited all the poems that have been quoted from Dr. Manmohan Singh's English translation of the ***Adi Granth***.

History stands witness to the fact that when an invading culture makes its presence felt, it is the lower and middle classes – the vulnerable segments of society, which bear the brunt. The eighth century converts to Jainism and Buddhism in the South and North-East of India, the Hindus who converted to Islam in order to escape the burden of the jaziya

tax in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, and the mass conversions to Christianity in nineteenth century India, largely comprised of the lower segments of society who found in conversion, mostly an opportunity to upgrade their status. To an extent this was also true of the Bhakti movement (a revolt from within the Hindu structure), which advocated the cause of the marginalized, and initiated the humanizing of the social structure. While most of the Nirguna bhaktas were from modest backgrounds; the Saguna school of Vaishnava Bhakti sported some aberrations to the rule. Chaitanya of the Bengal Bhakti movement who was a Brahmin teacher, Mira the Rajput princess who left the security of the palace to become a mendicant, and Narasimha Mehta the high caste Nagar Brahmin who used to sit all night in *kirtan* with the untouchable folk, whom he had renamed as *harijan* – meaning, the people of Hari. Making a case for mystic poetry, Sisirkumar Ghose writes in his book ***Mysticism : Views and Reviews*** :

The mystic belongs to the Family of Man and more than man, he has his comrades and is at home everywhere and nowhere. He alone has conquered alienation and looked into the heart of the human situation.....

/.. [Mystics].. do not consider organized religion as enough, [but] are vitally concerned with collective salvation, a divine milieu. (24-25)

The Bhakti movement bears all the features of a mystical movement : a movement led by a rich galaxy of mystic poets who were sensitive to the needs of the society, and took upon themselves the unenviable task of reforming society and improving its spiritual fabric.

The chapters on Kabir and Nanak also build bridges with the past and the future in an attempt to trace the continuities and departures in the Indian poetic tradition: which is the literary legacy of not only our regional literatures but also of literature written in English. In the poetry of Aurobindo and Tagore we have an example of the continuing poetic tradition. In the work of both these writers we find the same mystic grace and beauty so characteristic of the poetry of the Upanishads and the Bhakti line of tradition. While Aurobindo's poetry was a case of writing in English, Tagore was a bi-lingual who later translated his poetry from Bengali into English and went on to become the first Indian to win the Nobel prize for his ***Gitanjali***.

In chapter six, the focus shifts from the Bhakti movement in medieval India, to the colonial period and its new Indian poetry in English. The motive behind the juxtaposition

of the two is, (a) to read twentieth century Indian English poetry through the ideological and aesthetic leanings of its natural poetic tradition (in the regional languages), (b) to examine the continuities and departures Indian English poetry makes from its poetic tradition, and (c) to assess the reasons behind its successes and failures

Chapter six explores the effects of English education upon the Indian psyche and its changed world-view. (More historical details of this process are traced in the Appendix). One of the consequences of colonization was, the fracture / distortions it initiated in the Indian's sense of history, and its age-old traditions of art and culture. The complexity of its effects is most apparent in the corpus of Indian poetry that came to be composed in English (in the nineteenth century), and went on to establish itself as a genre ridden with the crisis of identity and representation. Indian English poetry over the last two centuries has traveled towards a sense of complacent self sufficiency. Its myopic obsession with urban/ metropolitan reality to the complete exclusion of the realities of rural India, denies to it the status of being an authentic literary representation. The crisis of identity in Indian English poetry has its genesis in the Indian's distorted sense of his/ her own literary history and poetic legacy. An in-depth knowledge of its own literary, aesthetic, and ideological inheritance on the other hand, would have erased the crack in its growth. This fact is well-demonstrated in the work of great poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, who wrote in the line of the mystic tradition of Indian poetry. In Aurobindo's poetry we have a living proof of how the English language could be stretched and moulded to suitably express the spiritual aesthetic, and ideological demands of the Indian consciousness. In him we have the wealth of a poetic which is able to fuse the mentality of its nation with the spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual potential that tradition creates for it. In Tagore's poetry translated into English, we have a manifestation of the rhythms, sensibilities, and pantheistic leanings of the mystic poet as he painted the humdrum of living in rural Bengal along the banks of the **Padma** river. Both Tagore and Aurobindo, were able to produce great poetry of lasting worth. Their's was a poetry well-rooted in its literary past. At the same time it used with ease, insights gained from its knowledge of Western literature, and thus furthered the potential of Indian poetry-writing.

The Conclusion attempts to define in some detail, the tradition of Indian mystic poetry, and suggests that it shares a common mystic idiom right from the *Upanishads* to the

Bhagvadgita, through the entire Bhakti genre, and unto the poetry of Tagore and Aurobindo. The thesis also makes a case for translation of regional poetry into English, and for the need to experiment with Indian forms and metres in the Indian English poetic. As Aijaz Ahmed comments in his essay, “**Third Worldism And Literature**”:

. .what we need is not the foggy generality of a Third World Literature, but the enormously painstaking and detailed task of producing a usable coherent knowledge of an ‘Indian Literature’, in its civilizational depth and linguistic amplitude, which we do not at present adequately possess. There are some research areas where we can usefully deploy our respective bi-lingualities and critical skills to fill in the very many lacunae that currently exist in our knowledge of our own collective past;... (208)

This thesis is one such attempt to fill that “lacunae” in our understanding of our “collective past”. Since both history and scholarship on the Bhakti movement have tended to study the bhaktas in isolation or in small groups so far, a major Bhakti poet like Nanak has been allowed to remain in the Sikh fold, and the merit of his verse lost upon Indian literary circles at large. Thus, while this thesis on the one hand has attempted to study Nanak independently as a poet and establish him in the Nirguna Bhakti tradition of Namdev and Kabir; it has, on the other hand, also tried to reconstruct by and large, the entire Bhakti movement; to see it in totality as connected, organic and as the earliest modern ideological phenomenon. The Bhakti tradition, in other words, emerges as the bedrock of Indian mystic poetry.

The objectives of this thesis are as follows:

- (1) It attempts to see Bhakti poetry, hand in hand with its socio-historical contexts, as a continuous poetic tradition. (This approach is sustained throughout the thesis)
- (2) It explores the various factors that led to the genesis of the Bhakti movement, the issues it addressed, the social reforms it brought about, the popularity it enjoyed with the marginalized segments of society, and the role it played in assuaging the Hindu-Muslim differences. (This remains the main concern of chapters one, two and three)
- (3) It makes a reading of major Bhakti poets like Kabir and Nanak, against the fabric of Bhakti and Sufi traditions; and attempts to see in their work, continuities with

their past and future Indian mystic poetry. (This is the prime concern of chapters four and five)

(4) The thesis indicates that great poetry is always rooted in a corresponding sense of history and spirituality. This fact becomes self evident in chapter six when Bhakti poetry (including that of Tagore and Aurobindo,) is juxtaposed with the Indian English verse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(5) By surveying the Bhakti tradition at large, the thesis also attempts to understand the features that characterized Bhakti poetry beginning from seventh century onwards until the fifteenth-sixteenth century. The Bhakti genre which is the prime concern of the first five chapters, provides an interesting backdrop to the concerns of the sixth chapter and steers the thesis to asking (I hope,) some thought-provoking questions.

(6) And lastly, in chapter six the thesis strives to analyze the effects of both the Islamic and the British rule upon the Indian culture and mindset. It also attempts to compare Indian poetry written in the Medieval period with verse written in English, during the colonial period. By undergoing this exercise, the study attempts to arrive at an honest understanding of Indian poetry writing in English, and to examine its continuities and departures from the tradition of Indian poetry.

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CHAPTER ONE

Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti Cults in the Southern Peninsula

Just as Buddhism had gone about consolidating itself in the frontier regions and countries neighbouring India – Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the south, Burma (Myanmar) in the east, Tibet and Central India in the north and north-west – even so within India, it had gained a stronghold in areas where Brahmanical traditions were weakest. Thus the missionaries of Buddhism and Jainism established themselves in South India. Later, the leaders of the Brahmanical way found that the masses in these areas could be won over only by going to them and speaking to them in their own language. Accordingly, the truths of the Upanishads, the conclusions of the philosophical systems, the basic beliefs and practices of Hinduism – all these were brought to the people in their own language, often in a homely style, enlivened with poetry, wit and satire, through songs by men of spiritual realisation, the saints. Thus arose all over the country popular religious poetry and song.

(V.Raghavan 350-351)

This popular religious movement which began as a revolt from within the system, came to be known as the Bhakti (devotional) movement. It began in southern India in the Tamil speaking region where poet-saints arose from the time of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi (fourth to ninth centuries A. D.). In "reclaiming the kings and the people for Hinduism", the poet-saints roamed about, singing their compositions to Vaishnava and Shaiva deities enshrined at various temples. For the purpose of verse-writing, they used and transformed whatever they found handy : Vedic and Upanishadic notions, Buddhist and Jain concepts, conventions of Tamil and Sanskrit poetry, prevailing ideas of love, service, women and kings, mythology of folk religion and folk song, and the play of contrasts between Sanskrit and the mother tongue, to list a few of them. Early Bhakti poetry that arose from such churning, was extremely rich and vibrant. Here are some

sample poems by two of the finest of Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti poets of the seventh and tenth centuries – Nammalvar and Basavanna respectively

- a) Evening has come
but not the Dark One
The bulls,
their bells jingling,
have mated with the cows
and the cows are frisky.
- The flutes play cruel songs,
bees flutter in their bright
white jasmine
and the blue-black lily.
- The sea leaps into the sky
and cries aloud.
- Without him here,
what shall I say?
how shall I survive?
(Tr Ramanujan *Hymns For The Drowning* 33)

- b) Nine hounds unleashed
on a hare,
the body's lusts
cry out:
Let go!
Let go!
- Let go! Let go!
cry the lusts
of the mind

Will my heart reach you,
O Lord of the meeting rivers,

before the sensual bitches
touch and overtake?

(Tr Ramanujan *Speaking Of Shiva* 69)

Early Bhakti which began in the eighth century, is often seen as the logical fall out of the South's interaction with the North, the rigid brahminizing of the South and its reformation by the popular cult of Bhakti thereafter. We shall therefore first trace the rising graph of Sanskrit and Vedic culture and then follow it on its route to the south of India.

During the rule of the Gupta dynasty in Northern India (320 to 540 A.D.), Hindu culture came to be firmly established. The Guptas called themselves *bhagvatas* – devotees of God – and went to special lengths to identify themselves with the lineage of God Vishnu. They adopted the names of the Gods, and put the figures of *Lakshmi*, Vishnu's consort, and *Varaha* his incarnation as a boar, on their coins. Many coins released by the artist-king Samudragupta who succeeded Chandragupta I in 335 A.D., show him playing the Veena (lute). Thus was established the precedent of a royalty blessed by divinity, a royalty authorised by the Gods and therefore, a species apart. "By the fifth century, Vishnu, Shiva, their families, minions, and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties" (Ramanujan *Hymns For The Drowning* 105). The Guptas had also patronised classical Sanskrit. The language of the Gods became the language of royal inscriptions, court poetry, mainstream literature, theatre, and the sciences. The Sanskrit language flourished.

As for the oral and vernacular traditions, whatever was deemed worth preserving (mostly medical, astrological or astronomical lore and legendary folklore), soon acquired a second, parallel life. Sometimes it even found place in Sanskrit texts. "Sanskrit preserved, as in amber, much that was oral in the local, 'little' traditions, and in this special and precise sense, Sanskrit sankritised...there were degrees of 'Sanskritisation', of which classical Sanskrit was the supreme example" (Ramanujan

126) A popular form of spoken Sanskrit was Prakrit which had its local variations from region to region. In its initial stages Prakrit had three main varieties: 1) Shaurasani, the main western variety, 2) Magadhi – the eastern dialect, and 3) Pali which was spoken popularly in both the above-mentioned regions. The southern varieties of vernacular languages like Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, stemmed from a Dravidian root, but they too had a vocabulary which owed much to Sanskrit.

In the post-Gupta period i.e. between 500 to 900 A.D., the western Deccan and the area south of Tamil Nadu became the lap of significant development, exchange, growth and reform in the fields of commerce/navigation, education/literature and religion. During the Gupta period northern India had witnessed the acceptance of the Aryan pattern, its consolidation by the ruling royalties and the brahminisation of both religion and education. Now around the turn of the sixth century A.D. and until about the ninth-tenth century, it was the south of India that responded to what had been a gradual assimilation of Aryan ideas and institutions. During this period there were three major kingdoms in South India: (a) the Pandyas of Madurai (established in the south of Tamilnadu), (b) the Chalukyas of Badami (in the north-western region centering around Nasik and the upper Godavari), (c) and the Pallavas of Kanchipuram who reigned over the south-eastern regions of the peninsula:

Amongst the later group of Pallava rulers, Mahendra-varman I (600-630), was responsible for the growing political strength of the Pallavas and established the dynasty as the arbiters and patrons of early Tamil culture. He was a contemporary of Harsha of Thanesar and curiously enough was also a dramatist and poet of some standing, being the author of a play, ***Mattavilasa-prahasana*** (The Delight of the Drunkards) Mahendra-varman began life as a Jain but was converted to Shaivism by the saint Appar, a conversion which was to have disastrous results on the future of Jainism in Tamilnadu. But his reign was not merely one of poetry, music and temple-building; wars were also to be fought.

(Romila Thapar 169-70)

The period beginning from mid-sixth century to the tenth century was speckled now and then by the long serialised Chalukya-Pallava wars. The Brahmins from the North had come as keepers of the Vedic tradition, which they believed to be the most sacrosanct

and valuable contribution of northern India. As keepers of the Vedic tradition, they were venerated in the South and found their supporters in the kings of the peninsula, who grabbed the sanctified halo of snob-elitism, that “sense of higher status” that conforming to the Vedic pattern bestowed upon them. As Thapar puts it:

The brahman's claim to being in communication with the gods, and their supposed ability to manipulate the unseen powers, was more convincing to the Tamil kings than the claims of the indigenous priests. An additional incentive to accepting the vedic pattern was the promise of heavenly rewards (184-85)

The desire among the royalty to qualify as being of divine origin and lineage, inspired it to go to ridiculous lengths in patronising the Brahmins, donating their wealth in wrong places and performing elaborate sacrifices/rituals which also involved sometimes, immense expenditure of the state's wealth. The following is a humorous account by Thapar :

Amongst the Pallavas, kingship was held to be of divine origin and hereditary, and they claimed descent from the god Brahma. On one occasion, however, when there was no direct heir, a king was elected, but this was not looked upon as something unheard of. Kings took high-sounding titles, some of which such as maharajadhiraja, were borrowed from northern usage. Others were of local invention, such as dharmamaharajadhiraja (i.e. great king of kings ruling in accordance with the dharma), and the more unusual aggitoma-vajapay-assamedha-yaji (he who has performed the agnishtoma, vajapeya, and ashvamedha sacrifices), which sounds rather like a self-conscious declaration of conformity with Vedic ideas. (174)

Such was the assimilation of Aryan systems by the Dravidian culture – suffocating the lower castes and encouraging snobbery among the privileged Brahmin and Kshatriya communities. Its rejection by the Bhakti cults of Vaishnava and Shaiva devotees was soon to follow. The presence of other religious faiths like Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, probably accelerated the process of the movement.

With the development of trade and mercantile activity, under the Pallavas in the south-east, and the Chalukyas in the north-west, Arab settlements had begun to appear along

the coastline of the peninsula – especially along the Malabar coast – from the eighth century onwards. The Arabs settled permanently in the coastal regions of south India, where they were welcomed as traders and given land for their trading stations. They were free to practise their religion as had been the case with Christians in earlier centuries or Zoroastrian refugees who had sought asylum under the Chalukyas, in the previous century. The present day Malabar Muslims are descendants of those eighth century Arab settlers. They being mainly traders, were not actively concerned with large scale conversions to Islam, and therefore adjustment with local society was easier, and communication unhindered. "But it is very possible that indirectly, and merely as it were by their presence, they contributed in some degree towards the budding and bursting forth of those great religious reforms which, in the absence of doctrines altogether new, introduced into Hinduism a new organisation and a new spirit ..." (Hedayatullah **Kabir : The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity** 78-79)

According to a more popular opinion, the contact between Hinduism and Islam before the twelfth century was not enough to generate permanent influence or borrowing. As R.C.Majumdar comments, the situation after the twelfth century was different, for by that time Islam had established itself in India and penetrated its roots more and more deeply as the centuries passed by. The other very major threats to Hindu religion were the religions of Buddhism and Jainism which became very significant in the early first centuries. Both Gautama Buddha and Mahavira (their founders), were of the Kshatriya caste, and opposed the Brahminical orthodoxy. The two religions*1 (see notes) were reformative in approach, since they discouraged animal sacrifices, appealed to the socially down-trodden, opposed the caste system and used the vernacular form of Prakrit for spreading their respective faiths. They were the first to raise a consolidated protest (fifth century B.C.), against the unfair hijacking of god by the Brahmins, and their arid systems of ritual and caste that denied dignity to a large segment of mankind. As a result they both appealed to the socially disadvantaged classes, and were well received by the Vaishyas who were economically powerful, but were not granted corresponding social status, and the Shudras who were obviously oppressed. As Romila Thapar observes.

The pattern of association of these two heterodox sects – Buddhism and Jainism – with urban centers and largely with the lower castes was repeated in later centuries with the various phases of what came to be

called the Bhakti movement. The formulators and leaders of reformist religious sects often drew their strength from lower caste urban groups. The social content of their teaching was an essential part of their religious doctrine. During this period from the sixth to the fourth century BC, there was considerable economic prosperity, particularly with the expansion of trade. (68-69)

Although political control still lay largely with the Kshatriyas and Brahmins, the mercantile classes were economically in the ascendant. Buddhism and Jainism were their answers to Brahminism. The sway of the two religions continued to grow in the coming centuries and received royal patronage as well. Chandragupta towards the end of his life converted to Jainism and became an ascetic. The zealous battle-going Mauryan king, Ashoka is well-known for his conversion to Buddhism and his propagation of the same. Royal patronage no longer remained the exclusive privilege of the Vedic tradition. Simultaneously with the rise of the mercantile community between 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. both Buddhism and Jainism saw their heydays. After this point in time, the seeds of decay and descent began setting in. Differences in the interpretation of the preceptor's teachings, formation of sub-sects, distancing from the common man and isolation in monasteries, were some of their pitfalls. New cults of devotion to Vishnu and Shiva – the Bhagvata and Pashupata cults – with an emphasis on personal worship rather than sacrificial ritual, had arrived upon the scene. Jainism and Buddhism had to gradually give way to this new form of religious worship.

Having surveyed broadly, the inter-relationships between the interweaving layers of royal patronage, caste, religion, land ownership, economic opulence and the changing hands of power in the South India of the seventh to twelfth centuries, I shall now move to the scene of the Shaiva, Vaishnava and the Virashaiva Bhakti saint-poets. Tamil society, at the threshold of the Bhakti era, was characterised by caste hierarchy with a sharp division between the Sanskrit literate class and the vernaculars. This was the logical fallout of the Aryanisation (or brahminisation) of the South. A process initiated in the Gupta period (320 to 540 A.D.) with the spread of classical Hinduism through Sanskrit, it had exerted great influence and secured instant favour with the Southern royalty. The politics of exclusion that followed the Aryanisation process in turn created a large section of, a non brahminical, 'non-privileged' class (Shudras, Vaishyas, and other non castes),

that was desirous of raising its status and hence vulnerable to conversion. The presence of the more democratic religions of Buddhism and Jainism, was seen as a welcome opportunity for status-promotion. Soon the Hindu orthodoxy perceived Buddhism and Jainism as a threat. Reformative steps were introduced within the Hindu fold to stem the flow of conversion. And thus evolved the religion of Bhakti – the emotional route to God – within the parallel cults of Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti.

The Bhakti movement in the South, “provided a powerful ideology for the simultaneous widening of the material base and integration of the various components of Tamil culture – social, economic, and political” (R Champakalakshmi “Religion And Social Change In Tamil Nadu” 162). Champakalakshmi divides the period of Tamil Nadu’s evolution into two phases : (i) from the seventh to the ninth century, and (ii) from the tenth to the thirteenth century. In the first phase he traces the changes occurring at the rural level. The evolution of an agrarian base led to the emergence of well-organised units called the *nadus*, wherein common agrarian problems and corporate activities were shared, and the hierarchical caste structure was introduced. This was followed by the identification of a typical folk or tribal deity with a pre-eminent godhead, or as A.K.Ramanujan would say, “the little traditions merged into the larger tradition” or more specifically the local deity or religious cult which was absorbed by the pan-Indian godhead of the brahminical religion. Besides these, there were also the ongoing conversions into the non orthodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism by the trading communities. Sea trade was on the ascendant. Around this time we see the emergence of urban features in the coastal towns and inland centres of trade and administration.

Considering that between centuries 200 B.C. and 500 A.D., there had been socio-religious tension between the Brahmin orthodoxy and non-orthodox sects, the period that followed between 600 A.D. and 800 A.D. , saw the revival of vedic religious icons, Shiva and Vishnu, not with their orthodox accessories, but through the Bhakti cult. The Bhakti cult recognised no middlemen between the devotee and God. It revolted against the tyranny of brahminical ritual and caste practices; but it was also perceived as having brought back the Puranic religion.

Marked by intense religious conflict, persecution and royal conversions in favour of the ‘orthodox’ religions, the first phase witnessed the establishment of Puranic religion through the bhakti cult, supported by

new institutional forms. It also represented the culmination of the process of acculturation, i.e. the assimilation of folk cults into , and imposition of local cults over the brahmanical religious systems of Vaishnavism and / Shaivism. The religious aspects of the change are seen in the spread of Puranic and Epic stories, new iconographic concepts, both Vaishnava and Shaiva, introduction of Agamic worship and above all building of temples by the ruling families (Champakalakshmi 163-164)

The popularisation of Puranic religion and Agamic forms of worship was achieved through the ideology of Bhakti or devotion expressed through the emotionally powerful hymns of the Bhakti saints. The former was sponsored by elite groups for mutual benefits like social dominance and political influence while the latter (which is the area of our concern,) assumed the form of a popular resurgence intended to bring a mystic religious experience within the reach of the uninitiated "common" folk through a personal communion between the individual and God through devotion. Hence also its choice of the vernacular medium

Tamil hymns composed by the Vaishnava and Shaiva saints in the Tamil lingua and made available for community singing (kirtana), added to the movement's popularity by providing not only spiritual delight and therapeutic relief/outlet/release; but also by making concessions for the lower caste and outcaste by allowing them access to the Puranic Gods. The Bhakti ideology thus aided the transformation of Brahminism into the sectarian religions of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, both of which evolved out of older beliefs of popular worship and cult practices.

Shaivism is based on the dual principles of Shiva-Shakti. It came to acquire a wider base compared to Vaishnavism. This materialised due to the incorporation of mother-goddess worship which absorbed all tribal and popular forms like the tree and pillar, and deities associated with funerary practices. *Muruga* a Tamil tribal deity was absorbed in the Shaiva pantheon. General scholarship is of the opinion that Shiva was the deity of groups belonging to the lower categories of agricultural classes and the craftsmen clan, professionally and socially differentiated from the higher agricultural groups and ruling families. Vaishnavism was largely the accepted faith of the ruling elite, esp. the landed chieftains called *velir*. Therefore *Mayon* – the deity of the *Mullai* region and pastoral

tribes was perhaps the only major popular local deity to get associated with the Vedic Vishnu and the Brahminic God Narayan. The concept of Vishnu as protector of the earth, as the husband of Sri or wealth or prosperity, and the inclusion of the earth-goddess *Bhudevi* as his second consort – all such connections made Vaishnavism the religion of the upper classes. By and large Vishnu remained alien to Tamil society. Shiva – the destroyer of evil – became the pan-Indian God of large numbers of lower classes. We can safely assume that such integration of local and pan-Indian religious traditions must have involved, in varying degrees, an exchange of rites, customs and beliefs.

The local deities and their symbols had been absorbed under the two heads of Shiva and Vishnu. Next came the conversion of local cult centres or spots, like an enclosed tree trunk or a pillar used for worship. Such spots were replaced by a temple or a shrine devoted to the worship of Shiva or Vishnu, more often to Shiva. The priests of the converted local cult centres were also integrated into the new order of worship. Such temple priests, particularly those called Shiva-brahmins (of a very inferior caste), later came to be distinguished from the more orthodox (and superior in rank), Smarta-brahmins or those brahmins who followed the Vedic and *Smṛiti* rites. Vaishnavism had its major centres in the northern and southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu and a few in the Kaveri delta region. Shaivism was mainly concentrated in the Chola region – i.e. the Kaveri valley and in and around the Pallava and Pandya capitals of Kanchipuram and Madurai. Their number was thrice that of the Vaishnava centers. The Bhakti movement which we perceive as a popular movement of the lower classes, however did not appear so at its inception.

Bhakti ideology in the South, emanated in an urban milieu. Its propagators came mainly from the upper strata of society. Among the twelve Vaishnava saints (called Alvars), only two belonged to the low castes. Similarly, a majority of the Shaiva hymnists known as Nayanars, also hailed from the higher castes. There were mystic poets, scholars and aristocrats who spoke of the equality of all men at the feet of the one God. The contributions of these two groups of saints form the bedrock of Tamil culture and, according to V. Raghavan, “still form the most appealing part of Tamil literature. The period from the seventh century to the ninth century covers the ages of the more important ones among these; others followed and kept the tradition in full vogue

throughout the subsequent centuries" (353). These "others" were probably from the less privileged classes as the following comment of Champakalakshmi suggests :

The propagators came mainly from the upper strata or castes but the movement acquired popular character with the inclusion of the members of the unprivileged castes like the potter, weaver, bard, fisherman, washerman, hunter and the untouchable panah. . in the hagiological work of the twelfth century AD However the Brahmana remained the medium through whom initiation into the bhakti religion and ritual forms of worship could take place. Thus the movement served only to perpetuate caste hierarchy by providing a niche for all new entrants, within the fourfold brahmanical framework, with graded ritual ranking. (167)

The above must be true to a large extent, but to completely dump the phenomenon, and come down upon the Brahmin saints so harshly, (mind you these Brahmins were saints, not ordinary priests,) would be grossly unfair. They were first and foremost saints (who were also poets), and then Brahmins. The fact is that hymnists in the initial stages of Bhakti were predominantly from the upper strata of society, largely because they were literate, had access to literary education and the leisure required for thought and scholarship. In an age when only the Brahmins and Kshatriyas had a right to education, when the merchant class – the Vaishyas – had converted to either Buddhism or Jainism, and the remaining Shudra and other non-classes lived like "the scum of the earth", it would be expecting too much change too fast. The seed of Bhakti had to be sown by some brave and enlightened bhaktas of God , and then allowed to germinate . How else can one account for the consistent spread of the Bhakti movement and the mushrooming of so many poet-saints from the lower rung of society, in the centuries to come ? In fact the Brahmin saints did an excellent job by flagging off the Bhakti movement and thereby throwing open the doors of the temples - even if the incentive behind their actions was, (1) to counter the proselytising menace of Buddhism and Jainism among the lower classes, and (2) to safeguard the stronghold of Hinduism by giving it a breath of fresh air. For instance in the twelfth century A.D. at the time of the codification of the Shaiva canon, a deliberate attempt was made to introduce several fictitious saints in addition to the historical figures, to increase the number to sixty three, many of whom were drawn from the lower castes, including the pariah or untouchable

The number sixty three being a direct borrowing from the Jaina Puranas dealing with the sixty three great beings!

Some desirable changes were to take place in the second major phase of societal transformation between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. This was also the period of the Chola dynasty. The Cholas took active interest in the development of temple centres and used the temples to widen the sphere of their royal authority. For instance, the establishment of educational institutions, hospitals and *mathas* around the temple, enhanced the beneficial aspects of the temple's role and projected the royalty as a very powerful and genial presence. However, it was Shaivist temples and the Shaiva faith at large that flourished under the Chola reign. "The Chola attitude towards Vaishnavism was initially one of lukewarm support, but later turned into neglect and active persecution atleast by the time of Ramanuja in the twelfth century" (Champakalakshmi 171).

How did the Shaiva Bhakti movement spread? Initially it developed through the consolidation of the Shaiva religious network centering around the temple. Development of Shaivist monasteries was the second institutional phase through which all extreme forms and non-conformist elements of Shaivism were integrated into temple organization and thereon became part of Tamil social organisation. The extreme Shaivist forms included the *Kalamukhi*, *Pashupata*, the *Kapalika*, and the *Siddhas*. Besides practising medicine, alchemy and Hatha yoga, the Siddhas were also against ritual ceremony and proposed suppression of devotion/bhakti in favour of ethical principles and quest for knowledge. They were also anti-Brahminism. (Kabir the Sant of sixteenth century North India can also be cast in the same line of Bhakti, influenced by Hatha yoga. One obvious difference being that he was not a Shaivite, and shunned association with any kind of cult or religion). The *Kalamukhs* and *Pashupats* were a sect of social and religious reformers – a group of non-conformists, who were brought into the system, claimed Brahmin status, and came to occupy a position of authority through the headship of the *mathas* in the ninth-tenth centuries, and later through the patronage of the Chola royalty, as temple priests and preceptors.

The shift had already begun. The centre, i.e. the Brahmin, was dislocated and the peripheral boundaries were shrinking. Temples in the tenth-eleventh centuries had been

marked with a high degree of royal participation, the twelfth-thirteenth centuries would witness the increased role of local landed magnates, itinerant merchant organizations and corporations of land-owning groups. There was more direct involvement of non-Brahmin elements in the temple-administration. This can firstly be attributed to the shift in money-power. Skilled classes like the weavers and the merchant-class had become prosperous. Land ownership was no longer a privilege of the Brahmins and the *velala* land owners. As the inscriptions of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries indicate, this neo-rich class of the weavers and merchants, (*kaikkolas* and *saliyas*), acquired greater control over land and participated actively in gift-giving activities. Eventually, they acquired administrative control of major temples and were seen as members of the executive committees administering temples.

Specialization of crafts and revival of South Asian trade from the tenth century A.D. led to the creation of special quarters within the precincts of the temple centre, for weavers, craftsmen, oil mongers etc. and separate quarters for members of trading guilds and markets. " (Champakalakshmi 170)

Secondly, an impetus to speedy liberalization in temple worship was the desire to retain the popular sway which Shaivist faith had come to establish. There was Tirunavukkarashu, the seventh century poet and scholar who on being reconverted to Shaivism from Jainism, in turn had reconverted the Pallava king Mahendra Verman, to Shaivism. Another instance were the Nayanars : Jnanasambandha (seventh century), and Manikkavachakar (eighth century) of Madurai, who contributed immensely towards the spread of Shaivism in the Pandya court. The songs of the Nayanars are surcharged with devotional feeling. The following verse sample by Manikkavachakar weaves the symbolism of "divine nuptials".

Melting in the mind, now standing, now sitting,
now lying and now getting up,
now laughing and now weeping,
now bowing and now praising,
now dancing in all sorts of ways,
gaining the vision of the Form (of the Lord)
shining like the rosy sky
with my hairs standing on end —

when will I stand united with,
 and entered into, that exquisite Gem of mine (the Lord)!
 (Tr V Raghavan 354)

Besides a common ideology and a distaste for rituals, the Nayanars also shared an instinct of hostility towards other contending faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and of course, Vaishnavism. The sentiment was reciprocated by the Vaishnava Bhaktas. In the following poem for instance, Nammalvar dismisses the Linga worshipping Nayanars along with the Jain and Buddha followers:

You believers in Linga mythologies
 and you Jainas
 you Buddhists

becoming all of you choppers of logic
 becoming even your gods

he stands there
 our lord.

come see him in Kurukur
 where rich ears of paddy
 fan him like ceremonial yak-tails

In this place without lies
 come praise him. (Tr. Ramanujan 57)

Vaishnavism, as discussed before, had initially been patronised largely by high-caste Brahmins and the landed elite, this being one reason why it had not fared as well as Shaiva Bhakti. Reformatory attempts were made in the twelfth century when Ramanuja (1017 to 1137 A.D., born at Sri-perum Budur), tried to provide Vaishnavism with a wider base of popularity. Ramanuja believed that liberation was possible only after death. It

was a person's Bhakti, true love, devotion and meditation that led to the goal of *mukti* (liberation). But God's grace (*prasada*) plays the greatest part without which man's efforts cannot bear fruit (Both Kabir and Nanak, laid emphasis upon 'divine grace' in their ethos of Bhakti) Ramanuja's philosophy, *Visishtadvaita* (i.e. non duality with qualifications), holds Brahmin as supreme reality, the jiva and the world being realities deriving their existence and powers from Brahman but ever remaining distinct from Him. In Ramanuja's philosophy, the Brahmin in his personal aspect is taken as Vishnu. Consequently the philosophy/poetry of sages who became spiritual followers of Ramanuja came to be known as Vaishnava.

Ramanuja tried to synthesise the Vedic philosophy with the emotionally powerful element of Bhakti. He also strove to ensure the more complete participation of Vishnu-worshippers hailing from different social strata, by ascribing to them some important aspects of ritual and management. Consequently, a new category of Shudra functionaries called the *sattada mudalis* (holy men who do not wear the sacred thread,) came into existence. The Shaivas viewed Vaishnava attempts at reform as a serious threat to their strong religious network. However Ramanuja's attempts at liberalization were not shared by his successors in the south, and by the fourteenth century there arose among the Vaishnavas its well-known schism into the northern (*vadakalai*), and southern (*tenkalai*) schools, based mainly upon their differences regarding the participation of low-caste members in the ritual of worship. The southern, i.e. *tenkalai* school of Vaishnavism being narrow and orthodox in approach, did not become as popular as Shaivism did, in the peninsula. But its liberal cousin – the northern *vadakalai* school of Vaishnavism spread widely in the north-west-east of India and produced many great Bhakti poets and saints hailing from the entire cross-section of class, caste and society.

*

Before we proceed to look closely at the parallel Vaishnava Bhakti movement in seventh-tenth century Tamilnadu, I would like to make a small digression – a fast forward – to the logical progression of the Śhaiva Bhakti into the Virashaivas (also called the Lingayat sect) of the tenth–twelfth century Karnataka. Virashaivism the Shaivist Bhakti cult of Karnataka, was more radical and reformist in its approach. It produced some very fine and powerful Bhakti poetry. The reader is sure to find in it,

echoes of Kabir's and Nanak's sarcastic prodding, their iconoclasm and their essentially postmodernist approach to the world and existence as such. The Virashaivas, were a group of kannada-speaking Shiva bhaktas living in the tenth–twelfth century Karnataka. They challenged the Hindu caste system and attacked the religious and secular role of Brahmins. They questioned and dismissed the role of Brahmins, brahminical ritual, sacrifice and superstition in worship. The following verse by Basavanna is a caustic example

The sacrificial lamb brought for the festival
ate up the green leaf brought for the decorations.

Not knowing a thing about the kill,
it wants only to fill its belly:
born that day, to die that day.

But tell me:
did the killers survive,
O lord of the meeting rivers? (Tr. Ramanujan 76)

They had instead their own small rituals; for instance they wore the *linga* – a small stone-emblem of Shiva – in a chain or string around their necks. The devotee's relation to the *linga* he wore on his body was that of a 'son of the house': when the *linga* was accidentally lost, the devotee often committed suicide.² The poetic form of Lingayat Bhakti was called a *vachana*. A *vachana* means, 'saying the thing said' already. The *vachanas* are religious lyrics in Kannada free verse. They are a literature that scorns artifice, ornament, learning and privilege, and enjoys the honor of being Karnataka's wisdom literature. Here are a few sample poems from Ramanujan's ***Speaking Of Shiva***

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?

Or did the master's breath
wear sacred thread?

Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgoing breath
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know
of the snares you set,
O Ramanatha?

(Devara Dasimayya Tr Ramanujan 105)

Bodied,
one will hunger.

Bodied,
one will lie

O you, don't you rib
and taunt me
again
for having a body

body Thyself for once
like me and see
what happens,

O Ramanatha.

(Dasimayya Tr. Ramanujan 107)

The following poem is by Mahadeviyakka, the woman poet-saint of that period who had given up clothing and used her long tresses instead to cover her body. Interestingly she

chooses to address her lord Shiva by the epithet "my lord white as jasmine", which also becomes her signature line.

Who cares
 who strips a tree of leaf
 once the fruit is plucked?

Who cares
 who lies with the woman
 you have left?

Who cares
 who ploughs the land
 you have abandoned?

After this body has known my lord
 who cares if it feeds
 a dog
 or soaks up water? (Tr Ramanujan 127)

And two poems by Allama Prabhu also translated by Ramanujan Both the poems link us with Kabir's Ulatbamsi style which in fact was in line with the Siddhas or Natha Yogis tradition of verse writing.

When the toad
 swallowed the sky,
 look, Rahu
 the serpent mounted
 and wonder of wonders!
 the blind man
 caught the snake.

Thus, O Lord,
 I learned
 without telling the world

Poets of the past
 are the children of my concubines
 Poets to come
 are infants of my pity

(154)

The poets of the sky
are babies in my cradle

Vishnu and Brahma
are my kinsmen and sidekicks
You are the father-in-law
and I the son-in-law,

O Lord of Caves. (161)

Known as the Kannada Upanishads, the *vachanas* record “great voices of a sweeping movement” of protest and reform in Hindu society, and stand (I am still following Ramanujan), witness to “conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men” A *vachana* translated by Ramanujan

How can I feel right /about a god who eats up lacquer and melts,/ who wilts
when he sees fire?/ How can I feel right/ about gods you sell in your need, /
and gods you bury for fear of thieves?/ The lord of the meeting rivers,/
self-born, one with himself,/ he alone is the true god. (Basavanna 84)

Since most Virashaiva poets were not bards or pundits in a court, but men and women hailing from a large cross-section of society, the *vachanas* use the colloquial Kannada. They disregard the strictness of traditional metres, the formality of literary genres, divisions of prose and verse, and work their way through innovations and spontaneity of free verse. No wonder the result of such churning is rich, vibrant and lush.

The four saints and greatest poets of the *vachana* tradition were Dasimayya (probably the earliest), Basavanna, Allama Prabhu and Mahadeviyakka. History ascribes to Basavanna (1106 to 1167 or 1168 A.D) the onus of initiating and establishing the Virashaiva movement in tenth century Karnataka. Basavanna was a dynamic political activist and a social reformer of his times. At the age of sixteen he had abandoned home to set off in search of his only lord Shiva. It was in Kudalasangama – land where the three rivers meet – that he received religious education and finally found spiritual realization. Hereafter he became his lord’s man and prepared himself to create a

society of Shiva's men. In a brief span of one generation Basavanna helped create a new community

A. K. Ramanujan paints a vibrant picture in his introduction to the poet saints in ***Speaking Of Shiva*** .

period. He helped cle Many great men like Allamaprabhu, saint of saints, were in Kalyana in that ar and shape the ideas of the Virashaivas Many others like Siddharama, Machideva, Bommayya (the lute-playing Bommayya), and the remarkable radical woman saint Mahadeviyakka were part of the company of saints A religious centre called Anubhavamantapa, (the hall of experience), was established in which the great saints met for dialogue and communion, shaping the growing new community. A hundred and ninety thousand jangamas or mendicant devotees are counted as having lived in Kalyan under Basavanna's direction, helping spread the new religion. (64)

The history of Bhakti would not repeat such a glorious phenomenon where many great saint-poets existed together in the same place at the same time and all were focused upon one shared creed of Bhakti and its ideals. Sikhism in the fifteenth century provides some sort of a parallel to the Lingayats. It was also a consolidated effort that denied all existing religions, to form a new creed of a reformist religion, thoroughly opposed to the ritualistic oppressive tendencies of religion, caste and social customs. But before we come to that, we shall turn back to eighth century Tamilnadu , to trace logically the parallel emergence of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement and trace its journey upwards from Tamil Nadu to the Deccan and from there its glorious career throughout the country.

In the earlier stages of the Bhakti movement in the peninsula, Shaivism was more popular (it still is), while in the later stages Vaishnavism took over the torch of Bhakti spreading swiftly in the West, North and East of India. The extraordinary popularity of Vaishnavism did not begin with the Alvars*3 who were great saint poets nevertheless; it began with the great Ramanuja of the twelfth century A.D. . Ramanuja tried to broaden the horizon of Vaishnava following which had been limited so far to the privileged and prosperous alone. He ensured greater non-Brahmin participation in the temple's services

and a liberal environment. On the front of scholarship, he tried to synthesize the Vedic with the Tamil Prabandhic tradition of the Alvars and to reconcile the metaphysical severity of the Vedanta with the personal and emotionally powerful tradition of Bhakti. As a result of Ramanuja's efforts, a new category of Shudra functionaries called the *sattada mudalis* (holy men who do not wear the sacred thread), came into existence. And to some extent, the worship of the twelve Alvars, including the Shudra Nammalvar and the bard Tiruppanalvar was also a result of this liberalism in temple worship.

The contributions of the Alvars have come down to us through the Tamil Sangama anthology (*Paripadal*). Their devotional sentiment is marked with a tone of unconditional submission expressed during those blessed moments of inspiration and their spiritual vision of the endearing lord *Mayon* (the hued one) whom they identified with the dark-hued Vishnu or Vasudeva Krishna, becomes a cannibal in Nammalvar's following poems, taken from ***Hymns For The Drowning***

My lord, my cannibal
While I was waiting eagerly for him
saying to myself.

If I see you anywhere
I'll gather you
and eat you up,
he beat me to it
and devoured me entire,
my lord dark as raincloud,
my lord self-seeking and unfair (69)

Elsewhere Nammalvar says:

. I've caught him
the big-bellied one
not content yet
with all that guzzling
on the sevenfold clouds
the seven seas

the seven mountains
 and the world that holds them all
 I've caught him
 I contain him now (Tr Ramanujan 79)

Tradition recognizes twelve Alvars They were Poykai, Putam, Pey, Tiruppan, Tirumalikai, Tontaratippoti, Kulashekaran, Penyalvar, Antal (a woman poet), Tirumankai, Nammalvar, and Maturakavi, in the order of their listing in the *Tramanucamurraṇṭaṭi*, the earliest and most authoritative work mentioning the Vaishnava saints in chronological order. Of these, the first three called the *mudal alvars*, belong to the seventh century. In an attempt to identify Vishnu with Shiva and merge the overlapping Bhakti traditions, the Mudal Alvars propounded the Hari-Hara sect But, no such response was forthcoming from the devotees of Shiva – the *Nayanmars* – and the tradition of the mudal Alvars was discontinued by the remaining nine alvars who lived in the ninth century, parallel to their counterparts (the Shaivites/Nayanmars), changing and revitalizing Hinduism and checking the spread of Buddhism and Jainism while absorbing some of the features of their rivals; features like the use of the vernacular, the defiance of Vedic authority, relaxation of caste-based restrictions, and creation of their own religious text. A.K.Ramanujan recaptures the Tamil countryside:

The saint-poets wandered all over the Tamil countryside, inspiring and converting kings, brahmans and peasants, affirming in poetry the holiness of hundreds of Tamil places dedicated to vishnu or shiva. Their pilgrimages, their legends and their hymns (which they sang by the thousands), literally mapped a sacred / geography of the Tamil regions and fashioned a communal self image that cut across class and caste. They composed the most important early bhakti (i.e. devotional) texts in any Indian language. The two rival movements despite differences in myth and ritual created and shared , a special idiom, a stock of attitudes and themes, and a common heritage alive to this day. (*Hymns For The Drowning* ix)

Although elitist in its wider context, earliest Vaishnava Bhakti was charged with a spirit of reform and humanism, often propagating the cause of the true devotee, who could then be a Shudra or a Chamar. The Alvar lyrics emphasise the eternal, pure, and

unblemished sentiment of the human mind, submitted in favour of the endearing who is divine, all immanent, omnipotent. Tirumangai describes his own state of affairs as follows: "Womenfolk, being adorned with ornaments laugh at me, but no shame, no fear, no courtesy remains with me now. If they become pleased to laugh at me, let them do so. I am totally ignorant of them. I do not like to win over my endearing Nilamani hued one. I prefer to be in association of Kurugundi instead of a jasmine creeper." Of the twelve Alvars, only two belonged to the lower castes, the rest came either from the Brahmin castes or from higher *velala*, i.e. Shudra, ruling classes. (During the upward course of Vaishnava Bhakti as it spread across the west, north and east of India, within a century, the trend changed. It produced many fine poets who were generally from the lesser privileged castes and classes).

Nammalvar (880 to 930 A.D.) regarded as the greatest of the twelve Alvars was a Shudra born into a princely *velala* family. He lived for about fifty years, though some put it at a mere thirty five years. He was born in Alvarthirunakam in Tamilnadu, after a desperate amount of praying and penance on the part of his parents. However as a new born baby he behaved so strangely that the crestfallen parents were compelled to abandon him at the feet of a local Vishnu idol. From there he began his career in sainthood. He was the most famous and most prolific of the twelve Alvars. Out of the four thousand poems that make the Alvar literature, Nammalvar alone accounts for one thousand two hundred and ninety six poems. The magnificent hymns, of which we have seen a few examples, were poured out by Nammalvar when he initiated his first disciple and also broke his life-long silence. The following is a poem by Nammalvar about creation and the warrior god Vishnu. Ramanujan has translated it beautifully:

First the discus
rose to view

then the conch
the long bow,
the mace,
and the sword;

with blessings

from the eight quarters,

he broke through
the egg shell of heaven
making the waters bubble,

giant head and giant feet
growing away from each other,

time itself rose to view:

how the lord
paced and measured

all three worlds! (Tr. A K Ramanujan 4)

After his death, Nammalvar's images (the images of a Shudra saint), were installed in temples of south India, and revered as the very feet of God. So also his poems. They came to be chanted in temple services and processions since the eleventh century. Thus, "a non-sanskritic, non brahminical religious literature ... became central to the brahmin orthodoxy. Inscriptions as early as the eleventh century mention endowments of land for the maintenance of reciters of the Alvars's hymns." Natamuni, a priest at the Srirankan temple (10th century), was the first to compile in an ordered manner, the four thousand hymns of the twelve Vaishnava saints and to arrange for their recitation. His compilation was called "The Four Thousand Divine Compositions" (*Nalayira Divyaprabandham*). Orthodox Shri Vaishnavas regarded the *Four Thousand* as equal to the four Vedas. In a significant move, the Sanskrit and Tamil, the Vedas and the *Four Thousand*, were integrated in their domestic and temple services. The singers of the Tamil hymns led the temple processions, walked before the god; and the Vedas followed behind:

- (i) He who took the seven bulls
by the horns
he who devoured the seven worlds

made me his own cool place
 in heaven
 and thought of me
 what I thought of him
 and became my thoughts (Nammalvar, Tr. Ramanujan 50)

- (ii) O ye ills tormenting me for long!
 listen, I tell you now, this body of mine
 has become the holy shrine
 of the great Lord, the Cowherd Krishna
 mark that, O ye ills that oppress me!
 I tell you one more word,
 you have no longer any hold on me
 know that and go!
 This is not the old town,
 it has now been taken over
 as a protected place. (Periyalvar, Tr. Raghavan 356)

As poems , the Alvars's hymns were the forbearers of later Vaishnava poetic traditions, influencing nearer home, the Warkari movement of 12th century Maharashtra , and the Padam tradition of 15th century Andhra Pradesh. *Padams* were composed throughout India Early examples in Sanskrit are those occurring in Jayadev's famous devotional poem *Gitagovinda* (12th century). *Padams* are short musical compositions of a light classical nature. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they were sung and danced to by the *devdasis* or *resyas* and their counterparts, both in the temples and royal courts. Telugu padams being devotional in character are included in the wider corpus of South Indian Bhakti poetry.*4 The following sample poem is by Annamayya, short for T. Annamacharya, (translated by Ramanujan):

These marks of black musk
 on her lips
 red as buds
 what are they
 but letters of love

sent by our lady to her lord?
 Her eyes the eyes of a chakora bird,
 why are they red in the corners?
 Think it over my friends
 what is it but the blood
 still staining the long glances
 that pierced her beloved
 after she drew them from his body
 back to her eyes?

....." (When God is a Customer 49)

Further on in time, the Vaishnava saint Sri Krishna Chaitanya's Vrindavan school of Bhakti became a major source of influence. It influenced in particular, the poet saints of Gujarat Narasimha Mehta, Akho and Mirabai were all immersed in Krishna-bhakti. The following is a song by Mira

I'm like
 the cloth
 that someone dyed.
 I'll go now
 play at hide
 and seek to please

my lord
 wearing five
 teasing colours.

When found
 I will become
 one-hued with light.

.....
 my love

he is here
inside

He does not leave
he doesn't
need to arrive.
Says Meera, I gaze
at the path day and night.
(Tr. Shama Futehally 79-80)

Some vestiges of the Bhakti school of poetry went as far as the nineteenth century and found expression even in the English language in the inspired and highly spiritual poetry of poets like Aurobindo Ghose and Rabindranath Tagore. The following is one of Tagore's songs from the *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, 1949 :

You came down from your throne and stood
at my cottage door.
I was singing all alone in a corner,
and the melody caught your ear. You came
down and stood
at my cottage door.
Masters are many in your hall,
and songs are sung there at all hours.
But the simple carol of this novice
struck at your love.

One plaintive little strain
mingled with the great music of the world,
and with a flower for a prize
you came down
and stopped at my cottage door (23-24)

Both Tagore in the twentieth century and Mira in the sixteenth century, talk about the coming or going of someone. That 'someone' (it could be specifically Krishna or just a reference to the divine,) at times is perceived as residing within, especially after the poet saint has arrived at a certain stage of spiritual enlightenment. A further progression on the mystic path would be the stage when the poet begins to talk about the creation of the world, universe, and to describe God as well, in sublime terms. Most of the later poetry of any mystical poet, we find, is absorbed in such themes of creation and the infinitude of divine reality. It is this which binds Bhakti poets from Nammalvar and Basavanna in the eighth-tenth century, to Narasimha Mehta, Namdev, Kabir, and Nanak between the thirteenth-sixteenth centuries to as recent as , Sri Aurobindo and many other lesser known mystic poets in the twentieth century. It is this element of mysticism and continuity with the tradition of Bhakti which lends such depth and familiarity to Aurobindo's verse. Just two stanzas from his short poem "**Surrender**" :

O Thou of whom I am the instrument,
 O secret spirit and Nature housed in me,
 Let all my mortal being now be blent
 In Thy still glory of divinity.

.....
 My heart shall throb with the world-beats of Thy love
 My body become Thy engine for earth use ;
 In my nerves and veins Thy rapture's streams shall move;
My thoughts shall be hounds of light for Thy power to lose.
 (*Sri Aurobindo: Collected Poems* 153) [emphasis mine]

Characteristic pan-Indian themes, symbols and dyadic metaphors thus find some of their first and finest expressions in the poetry of the Alvars and the Lingayats. They work around such themes as the lord's creation as play (*lila*), the incarnations of Shiva and Vishnu, Krishna's childhood and Shiva's cosmic dance; adopting at times the stance of lord and devotee, master and slave or that of lover and beloved. Besides quoting in translation, a fair amount of representative Shaiva and Vaishnava verse, composed between the seventh and twelfth centuries in South India, this chapter has also tried (a) to trace the socio-cultural changes that preceded and ultimately inspired, the inception of

- 4) Three major poets of the Padam tradition were Tallapaka Annamacharya (1424-1503), Ksetraya (of whom little is known), and Sarangpani (early eighteenth century), who took the Padam tradition further away from their setting among temple bells to the erotic ambience of the world of courtesans

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the Bhakti genre, and (b) to read inherent poetic continuities that it shares with Bhakti poetry of the later period

Notes

- 1) In 510 B.C. when Mahavira (aged thirty), renounced his family for asceticism, he wandered for twelve years until he gained enlightenment in 498 B.C. Initially confined to the Ganges valley, Jainism spread to western parts of the north and south of Mysore. Its vow of non-violence and strict limiting of property (i.e. landed property), made it popular with the trading community and the money-lenders. Thus Jainism came to be associated with the spread of urban culture. The prince Gautama Buddha (born in 566 B.C.) too had left his home and family one night, to become an ascetic. After six years of wandering as an ascetic, he turned to meditation as a means of salvation. On the 49th day of meditation he received enlightenment and gave his first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath, four miles away from Benaras (Varanasi). Buddha preached the eight-fold path of *nirvana* (enlightenment) which enlisted eight principles of action – right views, resolves, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, recollection and meditation, the combination of which was described as the Middle Way. Later Buddhism spread to many other parts of Asia.
- 2) The term “son of the house” may reflect the practice of rich masters and kings adopting servants as “sons of the house” who lived inseparably with them, and committed suicide when the masters died. Inscriptions of the period amply attest to the practice. The cabalistic interpretation of *linga*-wearing is that the *linga* represents the wearer’s soul, which is not different from the divinity, Shiva. (Chinandamurti 312)
- 3) The Alvars were devout saints who wrote the earliest devotional poems of Vishnu. The root verb ‘al’ means, “to immerse, to dive, to sink, to be lowered, or to be deep”. Therefore Alvar means, one immersed in God.

CHAPTER TWO

The *Vithoba* Cult of Maharashtra

From here we go to Pandharpur in Maharashtra, which from the thirteenth century onwards became the birthplace of a great religious movement initiated by one saint called Pundalik. The legend of Pundalik goes like this. He was a man who began to ill-treat his parents soon after his marriage, until one encounter with divinity reformed him so completely, that from the most cruel he became the most devoted of sons.

One day, as history narrates, God Krishna the king of Dwarka, sat thinking of his early days on the banks of the Yamuna. His nostalgia made him long to see Radha again, and so (although she was dead), through his divine powers he brought her back to sit upon his lap. Just then his queen, the stately Rukmini entered the room. Radha should have at once risen to do her honour, but she remained seated. Rukmini left the palace in a fury, and fleeing to the Deccan, hid herself in the Dandirvan forest. Krishna's search for his angered wife at last led him to the Dandirvan forest, where he finally found Rukmini. "The queen's celestial anger yielded to the endearments of the King." Reconciled, they walked together until they came to the sage Pundalik's hermitage. At that moment Pundalik was busy attending to his parents, so he did not bother to rush to pay homage to Lord Krishna and his wife. He continued to attend to his parents, stopping only for a second, when he flung out a brick for his visitor to stand upon, it being the rainy season. When he had finished, he went out and asked the lord to excuse him for the delay. But Krishna, far from being angry, was pleased at his devotion, and he bade Pundalik to worship him as Vithoba, i.e. one who stood upon a brick. 'A stately form arose at the scene of the meeting of Krishna and Pundalik (1228 AD).' Ever since then, in the same spot has stood the idol of Krishna standing on a brick around which the temple of Pandharpur has been constructed. Close to Vithoba stands an image of Rukmini whose flight was the reason for Vithoba's visit to Pandharpur. (*A History of the Maratha People* 104)

Etymologically, the name of the city Pandharpur goes back to "Pandurang", a name of Shiva – the deity originally worshipped in that place. The overlapping of Pandharpur - Pandurang-Vithoba provides an interesting case in the history of the fusion of Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti cults whose motive in fact was to point at the same one God or divine truth, which exists beyond all superficial compartments. Another interesting detail is the fact that in the present-day Pandharpur, the temple of God Vithoba, the incarnation of the original Vishnu, is surrounded by temples of Shaivite Gods. From the thirteenth century onwards, Pandharpur emerged as the pilgrimage of the Warkari Bhakti movement, which boasted an impressive galaxy of saints and bhaktas. The main five saints of Maharashtra being, Jnandev (1275 to 1296), the outcaste Brahmin; Namdev the tailor (1270 – 1350), Eknath (1533 to 1599), the householder Brahmin and editor of *Jnaneshwari*; Tukaram (1608 to 1659) the Shudra poet saint and Ramdas (1608 to 1681,) regarded as a political saint and preceptor of Shivaji, of whom both he and Tukaram were contemporaries.

Sant Jnaneshwar, the torch-bearer of the Warkari Panth was a born saint and genius. He is accredited with instances of miraculous abilities since the age of eight years. In a short life of twenty one years, he managed to compose a major philosophical treatise (the *Amritanubhava*), a large number of abhangas (religious poems), and an extensive poetic commentary on the *Bhagvadgita* titled, *Jnaneshwari*, not to mention a number of shorter works. Jnandev, in light of his life story and his spectacular end, was celebrated chiefly as a saint: Jnandev was also a thinking saint, and an imaginatively poetic thinker, as is manifest both in his *Jnaneshwari* and his *Amritanubhava*. The *Amritanubhava* is a philosophical poem written at the behest of his older brother and guru Nivrittinath; and the *Jnaneshwari* is a brilliant commentary as well as a recontextualised exposition of the *Bhagvad Gita*. Jnandev wrote it in 1290 A.D. when he was just sixteen years old. (*1, see notes).

As Prof. Fred Dallmayr (in his yet to be published essay, *Jnandev And The Warkari Movement*), comments:

Appreciation and admiration are bound to deepen by a closer reading of these texts....despite a diversity of genres, Jnandev's writings are held together or animated by a common concern or theme. This theme ... is the centrality of love or bhakti, where bhakti does not mean an emotive

sentimentalism but rather a genuine turning-about of the whole being (including mind, heart and senses). . . .Faithful to the teachings of the ***Bhagavadgita***, he gives pride of place to bhakti marga – without dismissing the other paths or margas (2)

The following is a stanza from the ***Jnaneshwari***:

Let the lord of the Universe be pleased with this sacred literary activity of mine,
and being pleased, let Him bestow on me this grace: May the wicked leave
their crookedness and cultivate increasing love for the good. Let universal
friendship reign among all beings. Let the darkness of evil disappear. Let the sun
of true religion rise in the world. Let all beings obtain their desire. . . .May all beings
be endowed with all happiness and offer ceaseless devotion to the Primeval
Being... (Raghavan 358)

Jnandev's life was marked by much agony and suffering, induced largely by certain actions of his father Vithalpant – a Brahmin from the Deccan village of Alandi. The life of Vithalpant is also an active example of the ensuing shift in the concept of the divine. Vithalpant was a married man and father to three sons and a daughter (of which Jnandev was the second), when he left his family and joined a community of ascetics in Benaras (Varanasi). Shortly afterwards, by a strange co-incidence, the guru of Vithalpant's ashram – a wise man called Ramananda (or Ramashrama) – undertook a pilgrimage through the south of India. His journey also brought him to Alandi where by chance he met Rukmini, Vithalpant's wife, and upon hearing her desolate tale of woe, he quickly discerned the identity of her husband. Instantly he returned to Benaras where he ordered Vithalpant to move back to Alandi and rejoin his family.

Vithalpant's return from *sanyasa* to the life of a householder – was perceived by the Brahmin community as a mixing up of life-stages and a contamination of *sanyasa*. He and his family were excommunicated by the ruling Brahmin elite, and the children bore this ostracism like a stigma for most part of their lives. Vithalpant did not commit any sin by returning to his family. He in fact, had been courageous and selfless enough to abandon his desire for renunciation, and return to his householder's duties. A smaller penalty by the Brahmin community should have sufficed. But what we have here is not a simple and a fair confrontation. It was the clash of two different religious ideologies. On one hand is the power structure of brahminical fiefdom which perceives the divine as

some “external overseer forever uncontaminated by human concerns and agonies” (I am following Dallmayr here), and on the other hand is the individual, stumbling upon his spiritual quest which perceives the divine, “as intimately involved and actively present in worldly affairs — a presence which can be discerned with the help of a loving heart. .. whereas a remote or shrouded God is to be accessible only to a small elite circle of pundits or gurus, or else to a privileged priestly caste, Bhakti religiosity is available to everyone in all walks of life.” While the Alandi priests, in their arrogance, claimed to “possess” God by virtue of their vedic knowledge (jnana), and rituals, Vithalpant learned that the divine can never be possessed and can only be pursued or intimated through a life of giving service. (Dallmayr 4)

Coming back to Jnandev and his siblings. The ostracism of their parents was passed on to the children as well. Despairing of the irreconcilable situation, their parents Vithalpant and Rukmini, committed suicide by jumping into the river Ganges. Jnandev was only eight years old then . After his parents demise , Jnandev and his older brother Nivrittinath, continued their efforts to obtain pardon from high ranking priests of the Brahmin community, but the Brahmins heaped insult and ridicule on the orphaned boys. Such was the struggle in which Jnandev spent most part of his short life, until the Brahmins recognised in the gentle and forbearing Jnandev , a great saint and spiritual genius.

His friendship with the poet-saint Namdev who was five years older to him, is worth mentioning. The two saints first met in Pandharpur and immediately struck up a close inner companionship While in Pandharpur, Jnandev became a devotee of the God Vithoba, and also commended Namdev to the God’s care. Soon after, the two saints went together on a prolonged pilgrimage, visiting most of the holy places in northern India, including Benaras and Delhi. Following this journey, they returned to Pandharpur in 1296 A.D. where a great festival was held in their honour, a festival — B.P.Bahirat reports — in which many contemporary saints “like Goroba the potter, Sannata the gardener, Chokhoba the untouchable, Parisa Bhagawat the Brahmin, and others took part.” It was at the end of this festival that Jnandev expressed the wish to return to Alandi and to enter Sanjivan Samadhi. On hearing this, Namdev was desolate and in tears — but followed his friend’s wish. Back in Alandi, the sons of Namdev first swept clean the place of burial. Then, Bahirat reports :

Namdev besmeared the body of Jnandev with the sandal-paste, marked his forehead with the pigment of musk, waved sacred lights and paid homage to the dearest of his heart. At the completion of the samadhi all bystanders were gripped with deep sorrow remembering the sweet company of the saint (14)

Namdev (1270 to 1350 A.D.), who later outlived his dear friend by fifty years, was inconsolable. He devoted to his memory a series of *abhangas* that became popular. He also celebrated the life of his dear friend Jnandev, in a work of three chapters in the ogee meter, called the “Adi”, “Teerthavali” and , “Samadhi”. By the “Adi”, “Teerthavali”, and “Samadhi” is meant, the genesis, pilgrimage, and the end. Composed of *abhangas*, this biographical work is a mixture of myth and history and yet it remains the only authentic account of Jnandev. Soon after, feeling lonely in the absence of his spiritual comrade, Namdev left for the North again and visiting holy places on the way, finally reached Punjab and settled there in a village called Ghuman in the Gurdaspur district, where he spent about twenty years of his life, spreading the cult of devotion and thus preparing the people of north India to face the wave of Islam which was fast engulfing Hinduism. “It is this flight of Namdev from Pandharpur to Punjab, (towards the end of the thirteenth century), and the socio-religious work that he did there that initiated the Bhakti movement in the North and eventually inspired poet-saints like Kabir and Nanak through their mainspring, Ramananda.” (Shanker Gopal Tulpule 335)

Coming back to the Pandharpur movement, under Namdev's initiative and guidance, Jnandev's very life became an exemplary model for the Warkari Panth. It set certain standards like castelessness, non-hierarchy, and caring human fellowship. The movement also absorbed from the saint's life, other features like implicit criticism of brahminical narrowness, egalitarianism in spiritual matters, and family-centred life. Under Namdev's guidance, the movement gathered in its fold an extraordinary company of saints and poets hailing from the entire cross-section of Maharashtra. The group included : Parisa Bhagvata, a Vaishnav Brahmin, Changdeva, the yogi turned saint, Vithoba Khechara, a Shaivite and guru of Namdev, Gora, the potter who used to evaluate saints as baked or half baked; Savata, the gardener, Sena the barber, Jagamitra Naga, the banker turned beggar, Janabai, the serving maid of Namdev, and

above all Chokhamela, the untouchable mahar whose wife, son and sister – all wrote abhangas in honour of Vithoba. History regards them all as “men of holy and austere lives”.

Their worship of Krishna was eminently pure and sane. Their preaching and their poems stimulated men's minds and led them to seek a refuge from their sorrows at Krishna's shrine. The spots where Jnandev and his brothers and sisters died*(3), became centres of pilgrimage from which the Pandharpur tenets were promulgated from the Bhima to the Tapti and from Alandi to Saswad. Men who made pilgrimages to these shrines were drawn to each other by their common knowledge of the Marathi speech and of the doctrines of the Pandharpur saints. In this way there came into existence the beginnings of a national feeling. (Kincaid and Rao Bahadur 108)

Later, a number of Muslim saints also became a part of the Warkari Panth.*(2)

While the miraculous life of Jnandev embodied the ideal of sainthood, the life of Namdev was closer to that of the simple, common man, and his *abhangas* express the intense yearning of a common man for the God of his heart. The full force of the Bhakti upsurge was to decline after the death of Namdev in 1350 A.D., after which the establishment of the Muslim rule began to dominate public life. However, a century later the scenario would change. The Deccan governments by now had begun giving precedence to the Maratha people and to Marathi language over the Afghani residents and the ruthless Muslim officials. As a result, despite the subjugation and harassment perpetrated by the Muslim officials, the Maratha people, owing to the teachings of the saints of Pandharpur, led vigorous and enlightened lives. “So it came about that the religious movement made ready the path for the national hero who was to free Maharashtra from the foreign yoke.” That was, Shivaji (1630 to 1680 A.D.). When he appeared on the scene, “religion gave to his genius, a fervour which he was able to impart to the comrades of his youth and the peasants of his father's village”, (Kincaid and Rao Bahadur 108). Shivaji remained in touch with both Tukaram (1608-1659 A.D.) and Ramdas (1608-1681 A.D.) during his lifetime; especially with Ramdas, who came to be the guiding light behind his challenging political career. Two years after Shivaji's death, Sant Ramdas also passed away. The saints left behind them the legacy of a spiritually enlightened and strong-hearted race of the Maratha people, who have kept alive the treasure of their teachings

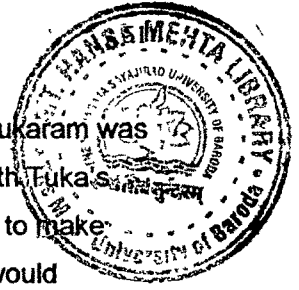
even today The *Jnaneshwari* and *Amritanubhava* of Jnandev, the inspiring iconoclastic *abhangs* of the poet saints like Namdev, Chokhamela, Sena, and later Tukaram and Eknath , all these contributed towards a body of Marathi literature that had the strength to light the spirits of its people and create a blazing fire of spiritual faith and resilient character, among the Maratha people The following stanzas of Namdev's verse have been taken from the *Granth Sahib*.

As the deer followeth the huntsman's bell,
 And giveth up its own life rather than cease its attention,
 In the same way I gaze on God . . .
 As the kingfisher gazeth on the fish,
 As the goldsmith meditateth stealing gold while fashioning it,
 As the lustful man gazeth on the wife of another
 As the gambler meditateth cheating while playing kowries,
 So Nama ever meditateth on God's feet –
 Wherever I gaze there is God
 (Tr Manmohan Singh Vol 5 2846)

I bring a pitcher
 and fill it with water
 to bathe my Lord
 But alas, in the water live
 forty two lacs of beings.
 How can I bathe Him with it
 O brother? (Tr Manmohan Singh Vol 3 1602)

Namdev is classed with the most iconoclastic of poets like Appar, Basavanna, Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak; poets who besides being saints were also reformers and religious radicals, in so far as they tried to rise above sect-based barriers, broke away from binding ritual and ceremony, ridiculed idolatry, and redefined divinity as based on brotherhood and equality. Scholarship attributes their stance as influenced by Sufism.

Tukaram the much-loved Marathi poet who lived in the seventeenth century, was not as iconoclastic. But he has acknowledged in his *abhangs* , that the idol is merely a via



media that facilitates worship for the lesser mortals. According to a legend, Tukaram was initiated into poetry-writing by Namdev himself. When Sant Namdev along with Tuka's deity Vithoba, appeared in his dream and told him that his mission in life was to make poems, the dream referred to a pledge made by Namdev to 'Vitthal' that he would compose one billion *abhangs* in his praise. Namdev therefore asked Tuka to complete the unfinished task. As a result of this missionary zeal, Tukaram in his lifetime, saw himself primarily as a poet. And he **was** a great poet

If one stands up
To argue or fight
One gets into a mess

Reeds don't
Need to exert any force of their own
They accept the force of water

If one tries to be tough
One meets one's match
The humble stay out of trouble

Says Tuka
Blend with all
You'll join
A global family.

*

In the pool of bliss,
Bliss is all ripples.
Bliss is the body
Of bliss.

How can I describe it?
Its too embarrassing.
There's no will left.
It compels more and more.

When the mother craves,
 It's the unborn's fancy
 What grows inside
 Is reflected out. .

(Tr Dilip Chitre 142 & 172)

The last and the finest of the great Warkari poets, Tukaram has been described by his younger contemporary Bahinabai Sioorkar, as "the spire or crown of the temple of the Warkari tradition of Bhakti". Spread over a space of four centuries, the four great Maratha poets*(4), along with many other lesser known bhaktas, poured into the surging river of Bhakti poetry, which bathed the Marathas in one dye as never before. As Dilip Chitre comments in his introduction to **Says Tuka** .

This poetry was sung and performed by audiences that joined poet-singers in a chorus. Musical-literary discourses or keertans that are a blend of oratory, theatre, solo and choral singing and music, were the new art form spawned by this movement. Bhajan was the new form of singing poetry together and emphasising its key elements by turning chosen lines into a refrain. These comprise a new kind of democratic literary transaction in which even illiterates were drawn to the core of a literary text in a collective realisation of some poet's work. This open-ended and down-to-earth nativism found its fullest expression in Tukaram, three centuries after Jnandev and Namdev had broken new ground by founding demotic Marathi poetry itself. (xix-xx)

The above holds true for the entire Bhakti movement which flowed all over the country like a river that purges, bathing one and all in its course (except those perched upon ivory towers), as it surged upwards from the southern peninsula and spread to the west, east and the north of the country. V. Raghavan in his essay on the saints of Medieval Hinduism, neatly sums it up as a "popular religious movement" in the Tamil speaking area where saints emerged from the time of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi (i.e. the fourth to ninth centuries). He says:

In reclaiming the kings and the people for Hinduism, they went about singing their psalms to deities enshrined at different temples. From the

Tamil country this movement of saint-singers of philosophical and religious songs in regional languages spread to the Kannada-speaking areas, whence the spark was ignited in Maharashtra; then the Hindi speaking areas took it up and the whole of North India was aflame with this resurgent and fervent faith. This popular presentation of the teaching of the Upanishads, the philosophical schools and the Puranic love, coincided with the linguistic phenomenon of the growth of the neo-Indo-Aryan languages of the North and the flowering forth of the literatures in the Dravidian family of languages in the South (351 - 352)

The Bhakti movement gave a breath of fresh air not only to the tradition of Indian poetry, but also to Indian music. Raghavan makes a note of it. These popular songs as he rightly says, had become the dual heritage of both, the religiously devout and of the musically minded. The songs were also to become:

the forerunners of a musical renaissance. In them a new form of musical composition took shape and a repertoire was provided not only for concerts but also for congregational worship or service in temples. It is these songs that one might have heard in Gandhi's prayer meetings; it is these too that one hears again and again on the *All India Radio*. (352)

Two later-day poets from the South who deserve to be mentioned for their significant contributions to both the field of poetry and of music, are : Purandaradasa of sixteenth century Karnataka, and Tyagaraja the Telugu speaking poet of the early nineteenth century Tamilnadu. Purandaradasa (1480 to 1564 A.D.), was a Vaishnava bhakta who belonged to the Haridasa sect of the saint-poets of Karnataka. He is deemed to have laid the foundations of the modern phase of the South Indian classical music system, known as "Karnataka Sangeet". Tyagaraja (1767 to 1847 A.D.), who was probably the last of the great Bhakti poets, was unique in his stress upon the role of music as an easier route to the divine than the path of yogic practice. A majority of the songs heard in South Indian concerts are the compositions of Tyagaraja. Tyagaraja adores God in the form of Ram and writes with an intensely devotional, moral and spiritual fervour. A few stanzas from Tyagaraja's song 'Svara-raga-sudharasa' are presented below:

O Mind! devotion associated with the ambrosia of notes
and melodies is paradise.. ..

To know and realize the nature of 'sound'
 originating from the basic plexus (muladhara)
 is itself bliss and salvation. Likewise,
 the knowledge of the various resonant centres of the body
 from which emanate the seven glorious notes of music.
 Through philosophical knowledge one attains
 salvation only gradually after several births;
 but he who has knowledge of melodies along
 with natural devotion to God becomes
 a liberated soul, here and now (Tr Raghavan 366)

There were many great bhaktas who deserve a place in any commentary on Bhakti poetry. But since the purpose of these chapters is to preview the general context of the movement, I shall only touch upon a few in some detail. While some of them like, Basavanna, Namdev, Nanak, Kabir and Ravidas were Nirguna bhaktas; there were others like Nammalvar, Jnandev, Sri Chaitanya, Mirabai, Surdas, Narasimha Mehta, Akho Bhagat, Tulsidas, and Chokhamela who were Saguna bhaktas. Other parallel schools of Saguna Bhakti were, the Bhagvata sect initiated by Ramanuja, the Vallabha sect of Vallabhacharya, and the sect of Sant Prannath, among others. The spirit of catholicity and universality was not absent in the above-mentioned sects; and neither were the predominant features of the Bhakti movement initially lacking in them. However in the long run, due to reasons like the overwhelming domination of the brahminical tenets, or filial inheritance of the sect's spiritual leadership, they tended to degenerate, and lost popularity.

Thirdly, running parallel to the Bhakti tradition of Sants was the Islamic tradition of Sufis, which (especially in north India), made a considerable impact on the Bhakti tradition; absorbing simultaneously, certain devotional practices from the Nath yogis and the Bhakti movement in general. Nirguna Bhakti, of which Kabir and Nanak were leaders, is perceived as the closest that Hindu Bhakti got to Sufism, with its stress upon the repeating of *nam* (i.e. name – *nam japna*), and its perception of God as formless. In exchange, the Sufis absorbed the bhakta's tradition of singing – *bhajan-kirtan* – as a means of devotion, by initiating Sufi poetry in the *qawwali* form. This aspect of the Sufis (who themselves were Islamic rebels), was disliked and resisted by the Islamic

orthodoxy of the Mullahs. In the next chapter we shall take a broad view of the Bhakti movement in the north, north-west and east of India. We shall examine the socio-political scene that was also to become a subtext in the poetry of the most secular/cosmopolitan poets of the Bhakti movement; Kabir and Nanak – poet saints who outrightly disowned their inherited filial faiths and refused to get entrapped into any ism of any sort.

Meanwhile, in this chapter we have briefly examined the main poets and the ethos of the Warkari Panth of (mainly) the thirteenth and fourteenth century Maharashtra. We have also acknowledged the presence of Sufism which by then had considerably made its presence felt.

Notes

(1) Following Jnandev's Samadhi, both his life and his writings developed into prime exemplars of genuine religiosity for the Warkari movement, and also into crucial sources and focal points of Bhakti devotion, throughout the ensuing centuries and until the present times. Jnandev's *abhangas* (poetic couplets) have continued to be remembered and chanted by pilgrims in the form of popular bhajans, just as his teachings are transmitted in kirtans through a combination of song and dance, with exegetic commentary and instruction.

(2) "Medieval Maharashtra And Muslim Saint Poets" by N.H.Kulkarni. **Medieval Bhakti Movements Of India** . Edited by N.N.Bhattacharya. Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. , 1989.

(3) After Jnandev's death his younger brother Sopana imitated at Saswad (east of Pune), the same act of self-immolation. Then his sister Muktabai vanished in a lighting flash on the banks of the Tapti. Nivritti the last left, took samadhi at Trimbakeshwar in Nasik district.

(4) The four were Jnandev, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram. Eknath belonged to the sect which worshipped Dattatraya as its deity and was founded by two sanyasis during the Bahmani period. Refer page 17 of ***A History Of Marathi Literature***. Editors K.Deshpande and M.V.Rajadhyaksha. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988

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CHAPTER THREE

A Bhakti of Encounter :

Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti in North India

A prominent feature of the fourteenth century (period by which time the Bhakti movement had covered the entire country), is the presence of Islam and Islamic culture: its forced conversions and the numerous raids enacted under the rule of the Mongol, Afghan and Turkish invaders; which culminated into the Mughals (beginning with Babur in 1506 A.D.) establishing a stable Mughal empire by the earlier half of the sixteenth century. Until then the Indian subcontinent (especially Punjab, Sindh and upper Gujarat), was rent with political instability, cultural insecurity, and the terror of plunder and poverty. The advent and rule of Islamic invaders in their first century in India saw the Delhi Sultanate changing hands among the Mongols, Afghans and Turks who kept ousting and snatching power from each other; from time to time treating Indian land like a priced booty, to be conquered and possessed.

The pillaging and looting of Buddhist monasteries and Hindu places of worship was the direct expression of Muslim antagonism towards any religion other than Islam. Buddhism being an institutionalized and 'proselytizing' religion attracted even more undesired attention:

...the attack on the monasteries resulted in an exodus of Buddhists from eastern India to south-east Asia. Islam found its largest following in previously Buddhist areas of India, the north-west and the east. From the fourteenth century onwards the Bhakti movement became a dynamic force in north Indian society and up to a point, filled the vacuum created by the retreating Buddhists, since it attracted the professional castes.

(Romila Thapar 264)

The inception of the Bhakti movement and the coming of Islam (and the Sufis) to India was curiously simultaneous in the north and north-west of India. But we cannot say that the Bhakti movement was caused by Islamic and Sufi influence; it was only further stimulated by their presence. The Sufis (who were in fact rebels against orthodox Islam),

and the Hindu saints (who were placed similarly vis -a- vis the Brahmin orthodoxy), were actually to become the meeting-points for Islam and Hinduism, and a rich sharing and exchange of spiritual values, thoughts, and modes of devotion followed.

The high-caste Kshatnyas and the Brahmin orthodoxy, on the other hand, recoiled more and more within themselves. They maintained a strict distance from the impure (*Mleccha*) invaders for whom they only had contempt and disgust (*1 see notes). Thus, threatened by foreign culture, the orthodoxy became more fanatic and self-conscious:

In the process of preserving their exclusiveness, the Brahmins concentrated upon their own internal resources and traditional literature. This led to a revival of the study of older texts, with detailed commentaries and digests. When the new rulers asked to see the legal basis and interpretation of Hinduism, the brahmins provided the material basis on early texts, which dealt with a theoretically ideal state. There was little or no attempt to recognize, let alone come to terms with, a powerful group which did not fit into a caste hierarchy. (Thapar 304)

The impact of such dynastic changes was therefore felt most strongly in the highest circles where resentment was often pronounced, and resistance seethed at its most intense. The rest of the society had more or less accepted the new rulers. It was at the lower levels of caste and class, that the new culture of Islam was to enter the pattern of Indian civilisation and make its strongest impact.

History has stood witness to the fact that an invading culture always appeals to the lowest (and obviously the most gullible), section of the society. In the south India of the fourth-fifth centuries, it was the lower castes – primarily the merchant classes – that had converted to Buddhism or Jainism. Similarly a few centuries later, when some enlightened Brahmin-saints of Tamil Nadu visualised the threat to Hinduism, and initiated a modified, more liberal and emotionally appealing form of religion through the cult of Shaiva or Vaishnava Bhakti, their followers were mainly from the Shudra and artisan classes. Their opponents of course, were the Brahmin orthodoxy. Later we know, the Bhakti movement spread all across the country and produced great saints and poets – some were high caste Brahmins and many were from the lower, even the most unprivileged of classes.

The Sufis, who were rebel-saint-poets from within the Islamic infrastructure were identically placed, vis-a-vis the Islamic orthodoxy, its *Ulemans* and the *Mullahs*. The Sants and the Sufis in other words were representing the marginalised classes – the periphery; while the Brahmin orthodoxy and the Islamic fanatics were the priest-heads of the central ruling class. The slow but steady march of the periphery into the centre (represented by the vernacular and Sanskrit language; the lower castes and the Brahmins respectively) , their Derndian “displacement of the centre”, is what makes the Bhakti movement such an interesting and volatile area of study, historically, architecturally, linguistically, theologically, sociologically, and as the first milestone in modern Indian literature in regional languages:

The fusion of Islamic culture with existing Indian culture achieved its most positive expression in the activities of the artisan classes of the towns and amongst the cultivators as is evident from the socio-religious ideas of the time, and also in primarily artisan activities such as building monuments, the fusion being evident in the architecture of the period. The pattern of living in both these classes came to be interrelated to a far greater degree than amongst the nobility. Domestic ceremonies and rituals such as those connected with birth, marriage, and death became mingled. The converted Muslims were also heirs to longstanding rituals practised by the Hindus. New ceremonies which had come with Islam, and which were regarded as auspicious, crept into Hindu ritual.

(Thapar 300)

Such was the thread and weave of the society from which emerged a number of Hindu poet-saints and Muslim Sufis. Many of them strove to rise above the Hindu-Muslim differences, and commanded both Hindu and Muslim following. The two saint poets who had been mainly responsible for the spread of Bhakti in the northern belt were, a tailor and a Brahmin, i.e. Namdev from Pandharpur, and Ramananda the learned Vaishnava of Benaras. After the death of his friend Sant Jnandev , Namdev had journeyed up north till Punjab (where he spent twenty years) spreading the message of God through his *abhangas* and Bhakti, and asking people to shed the slough of ritual and superstition . Ramananda originally educated under the more conservative school of Vaishnava Brahminism, was also someone who relaxed the rigidities of the system, introduced egalitarian reforms and readily accepted disciples from lower castes and communities,

thus dismissing the sanctity of casteism. He also introduced the cult of Rama-Sita Bhakti. His disciples in turn spread his vision of love and equality and some of them (like Kabir, Ravidas, and Dhanna), even went down in history as great poet-saints of the era. Among the Sufi orders, those which found greater acceptance were as follows: the Qadri, the Suhrawardi, the Naqshbandi, and the Chisti. The Chisti Silsilah proved to be the most brilliant in terms of (a) the great Sufi-poets it produced, (b) the large areas it spread into, and (c) the large following it gathered. Baba Sheikh Farid, who belonged to the Chisti Silsilah is known as a harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity along the likes of Nanak and Kabir.

Going back to history, Sufism was born in the ninth century Arabia and during its travel and sojourn through Iran and India, it underwent slight perceptual shifts. For instance it stressed upon the emotional content of devotion, as against the dry-as-dust self-denial of the Arabs:

The Arabs laid stress on asceticism and torturing the body, while the later Sufis in Iran and India under the influence of Greek philosophy, Platonic ideology, Christian faith, Vedantist thinking, Buddhist lore, etc. believed in leading an emotionally rich life. They drank and danced and advocated that physical love can sublimate itself into spiritual love. They had faith in God; they loved the Prophet but they maintained that the Murshed or Guru could also lead to Divine Reality. (Sekhon and Duggal 64)

Between the end of the twelfth century and the end of the fifteenth century, three great Sufi orders had migrated from Iraq and Persia into northern India. They were, the Chistis, the Suhrawardis and the Firdausis. The Sufis had followed the Muslim conquerors to India, more with a view to propagating Islam. They established several centres at Lahore, Pakpattan, Kasur, Multan, and Uch in Punjab. However, only those survived, who absorbed and mingled with the culture of the land, and propagated a more liberal Sufi philosophy. Their approach to God was that a lover-wife who pines for a reunion with her beloved- husband, suffers, repents, undergoes asceticism, finally gains enlightenment and merges with God. Some Sufis justified the incorporation of music, not sanctified by orthodox Islam, on the ground that:

...a Sufi is a lover of God, and as such he stands in a different relation to God from others who are merely 'abd' or slaves. The Indian Sufis laid

stress on repeating the name (japu), concentration(dhyan), and meditation(habs-i-dhyan)...like the Iranian Sufis who sang the praises of Yusuf Zulaikha, Laila Majnun and Shirin Farhad, the Sufis in the (17th, 18th century) Punjab idealised the romances of Heer Ranjah, Sohni Mahiwal and Sassi Punnun. (Sekhon and Duggal 65)

For the purpose of the thesis, we shall only trace briefly the career of the most popular Sufi order – the Chisti Silsilah – through the three great Sufis it produced. Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer, Baba Sheikh Farid of Ajodhan, and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi. The saint who introduced the Chisti order in India was Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, who established his Khanqah at Ajmer during the period of the Ghorian conquest of India in the closing years of the twelfth century. He had a long line of spiritual successors who continued his mission in India. Baba Shaikh Farid (1173-1265 A.D.), who came after him and was the most remarkable of the next generation of popular Sufis of the Chisti Silsilah, was the disciple of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Kaki.

Baba Sheikh Farid was born and brought up at Khotwal, a small village near Ajodhan in West Punjab. On growing up, he shifted to Multan for further studies; where he also came across his spiritual mentor, Hazrat Qutb-ud-Din Bakhtiar Kaki. Hazrat Kaki took Farid along with him to Delhi where they met Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti – the greatest contemporary name among Muslim men of God. History records, that Sheikh Farid underwent severe penance and asceticism under Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din's stewardship. He hung himself upside down in a well for forty days. He neither ate nor drank but remained attuned to the Almighty. The following lines by Farid refer to this experience, "Says Farid, / My bread is made of wood, / And hunger is my sauce; / Those who eat rich food, / will suffer severe agonies". A great poet of his times, Farid wrote his verse in musical measures so that it could be sung. He also wrote a large number of couplets which became very popular with Punjabi-speaking people. A sample:

Says Farid

I have seen the eyes that hued the world.

A trace of kohl they would not bear.

And birds, today, have made their nests in them.

Says Farid,

Why do you roam the jungles with thorns pricking your feet?
 Your lord swells in your heart.
 And you wander about in search of Him.

Says Farid,
 I thought I was alone who suffered.
 I went on top of the house,
 And found every house on fire.

(Tr. K.S.Duggal 19)

It was fortunate for the world that Guru Nanak met Sheikh Ibrahim, a follower of Baba Farid in the sixteenth century, and recorded Baba Farid's poetry which was later preserved in the **Guru Granth Sahib** of the Sikhs. Quoted below are a few more specimens of Farid's verse that I have picked up from Sekhon and Duggal's **History Of Punjabi Literature**. In all of them is reflected the longing to unite with the Lord. They have been translated by S.S. Sekhon, and the emphasis is mine :

(a) **The lanes are muddy and far is the house**

of the One I love so much.
 If I walk to Him I wet my rug, and
 remaining behind, I fail in my love! (21)

(b) Sorrow is the bedstead,

Pain the fibre with which it is woven,
 And separation is the quilt
 See this is the life we lead, O Lord. (21)

(c) On the bank of a pool in the moor

The swan has come to alight

But he does not dip his beak to drink,
He is eager to fly away (23)

(d) Says Farid, you must fathom the ocean which contains what you want.

Why do you soil your hand searching the petty ponds,
 Says Farid, **the Creator is in the creation**

and the creation in the Creator

Whom shall we blame when He is everywhere.

(23-24)

The third great Sufi poet of the Chisti Silsilah was Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi. He was Sheikh Farid's most prominent follower as well. At the age of ninety, when Baba Farid was about to breathe his last, he sent for Sheikh Nizamuddin, and only after taking leave of him, he passed away. One of the greatest Sufis of his times, and a mighty spiritual force, Nizamuddin Auliya like his predecessors, stressed upon the element of love as a means of the realisation of God. The love of God, to him implied, the love of humanity. His deep attachment to the idea of universal love is manifest from the following utterance. "O Muslims! I swear by God, that He holds dear those who love Him for the sake of human beings, and also those who love human beings for the sake of God. This is the only way to love and adore God" (Tr. Malsha & Gavasker 551). His vision of the world is marked by a highly evolved sense of secularity and kindness. For instance, the Hazrat was particularly pleased at the spiritual progress made by some butchers of Delhi. According to him, "Every particle of the universe shows the way to God, but no way to Him is shorter than the one through the human heart." (J S Grewal 103)

Once one has (hypothetically speaking) met the Sufis, and read their poetry, one can see clearly for oneself the extent of Sufi influence upon our more egalitarian poets like Namdev, Ramananda, Kabir, and Nanak. A few samples of their verse, which illustrate the point, follow:

(a) Namdev's verse :

The snake casts off its slough but not its poison
Thou art like the heron
that fixes its attention on fish in water...

...wherever I go there the lord is contained

Amidst supreme bliss, He ever sports.

I bring flowers and weave a garland to worship Him.

But the humming bumble bee has first sucked, the fragrance

How, O Brother, can I worship God?

I fetch milk and cook it to make a pudding,
 with milk, rice and sugar to feed the Lord
 But the calf has first defiled the milk
 How should I adore the Pervading God with it?

Here is the Lord,
 there is the lord.

Without the Lord there is no world ever.

**Thou O Lord, supplicates Namdev, art fully contained
 in all the places and inter-spaces.**

(Tr. Manmohan Singh Vol 3 1602-1603) [All emphasis mine]

*

(b) Kabir:

The musician plays a peerless instrument
 with eight sky-mouths thundering
**Only you, are played, only you
 thunder, your hand alone
 runs up and down.**

In one sound thirty-six ragas, speaking
 an endless word.

The mouths a shaft
 the ear a sounding gourd –
 the Satguru made the instrument.

(Tr. Hess and Singh 63)

*

Think pandit, figure it out:
 male or female?

In a Brahmin's house she's Mrs. Brahmin,

in a yogi's she's a disciple.

Reading the Koran she's a Turkish lady.

In Kaliyug she lives alone

She doesn't choose a husband,

doesn't get married,

but has sons

Not a single black-haired fellow escapes her,

but she's a permanent virgin

She stays with her mother,

doesn't join her in-laws,

won't sleep with her husband.

Kabir says, he lives from age to age

who drops his family, caste and race.

(Tr. Hess and Singh 56-57) [Emphasis mine.]

*

(c) Nanak's verse :

Discipline is the workshop;

patience, the goldsmith;

the anvil , one's thinking;

wisdom, the hammer;

Fear, the bellows,

austerties, the fire;

and feeling, the vessel

where the deathless liquid is poured.

In such a true mint

is forged the Word,

and those on whom He looks

do their rightful deeds.

Nanak says:

the One who sees,

sees.

He observes.

* (Tr. J.S.Hawley 88 .)

In Chet agreeable is the spring

and beautiful the bumble bee

The forests are flowering

in front of my door.

May my Love return home

.....:

the beautiful cuckoo sings

on the mango tree. How can I bear

the pain of my mind?

The black bee is flitting on the blossoming bough.

How can I survive, O mother?

I am dying.....

(Tr. Manmohan Singh 1447)

(d) Ramananda :

Wherever I go, I find water and stones there.

Thou O Lord, art equally contained in everything.

The Vedas and Puranas all I have seen and searched.

I may go there only if , the Lord be absent here.

My True Guru, a sacrifice am I unto thee.

Who has cut away all my doubts and perplexities.

Ramanand's Master is the All pervading Lord.

The Guru's word destroys millions of misdeeds.

(Tr. Manmohan Singh 3941) [All emphasis mine.]

There is in the poems above an openness about God, who is visualized as a free flowing spirit that is present everywhere , in a rock , a mountain, in the buzzing bumble bee, or the calf that suckles its mother It is seen as both the creator and the created In the garb of a Brahmin or a Muslim the core is that same one God. He does not need a

temple to be worshipped, for this entire universe is a glorious monument – an evidence – of the great moving spirit. Nature is all the time performing worship to that one God who is everywhere (outside and within). The above poems and Bhakti poetry at large, is all the time saying so. And by casting aside all the shackles (whether physical, psychological or social) imposed upon the concept of the divine, the Bhakti and Sufi saints set God free from the prison of ritual and religion. By doing so they also made him more approachable. The heightened lines in the poems above fairly consolidate the point.

Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.) occupies a unique place in the history of religion in medieval India. Although brought up in the traditional school of Vaishnavism founded by Ramanuja, he gave it an altogether new face by his reforms. He founded a new school of Vaishnavism based on the egalitarian gospel of love and devotion. Although a Brahmin himself, Ramananda abolished the consideration of caste which had been a feature of Vaishnavism. He did not distinguish between his high and low caste disciples and often used to dine with them. Many of his pupils hailed from the so-called degraded classes. Among his first twelve disciples were Asananda, Surasurananda, Sukhananda, Paramananda, Mahananda, Pipa (a Rajput ruling chief), Kabir (a weaver), Bhavananda, Sena (a barber), Dhanna (a Jat peasant), Sri Ananda, and Ravidas (a cobbler). Like his southern predecessors, Ramananda initiated the use of the vernacular in the North of India. The third, not necessarily the most successful of beginnings by Ramananda was the cult of Rama and Sita, instead of Krishna and Radha. Other aspects which were part of the larger mystic wave of the period, like the movement towards the inner self as opposed to external ritual superficial ranting in God's name, were an intrinsic part of Ramanand's teachings. The following verse included in the **Granth Sahib** echoes the spirit of saints like Nammalvar of eighth century Tamilnadu, and the Lingayat saint Basavanna from twelfth century Kamataka *(2) among others:

O wither should I go.

There is bliss in my very home.

My mind has stilled.

It has become,

a cripple.

One day in my mind, welled up a desire
 I ground sandal-wood and took
 distilled aloe-wood and many perfumes

To the Lords temple I hurried for worship
 But that temple, the Guru revealed
 was within.

(Tr. Myself **Granth Sahib** 3941)

It is safe to say that Ramananda borrowed ideas*(3) from the various religious schools that flourished before him, vitalized them with the love and devotion of his heart, and founded a new path of spiritual realization. He cleansed and refurbished the school of Vaishnava Bhakti with his enlightened and humanistic approach; and was mainly instrumental in ushering in the new epoch of medieval mysticism in India. It was this path which Kabir and others followed later and decorated with their lives, their faith and rich poetry.* (4)

The most famous disciple of Ramananda was, Kabir. Details about his paternity and early life are shrouded in mystery. One legend ascribes him to a Brahmin unwed or widowed mother who abandoned him to escape social taboo. What is known for definite is that he was brought up by a Muslim weaver named Niru and his wife Nima. Whether Kabir's Muslim parents were his foster parents or real parents, will always remain a mystery. So also the date of Kabir's birth, about which there are two opinions. The most accepted dates of his birth and death are (1440-1518 A.D.), those which take Kabir to be a contemporary of Sikandar Lodi who ruled from 1489 to 1517 A.D. This fits in with (a) the traditional belief that Kabir died in 1518 A.D., (b) that Nanak met him about 1496 A.D., (c) and that Sheikh Taqqi was the religious guide or rival of Kabir. These details would not correspond with the other tradition which places his birth and death between 1338 and 1448 A.D., and confirm that he was a disciple of Ramananda. According to legend, Kabir tricked his way into discipleship. He lay down one early morning, on the steps of the bathing *ghat* where Ramananda used to take his daily bath. In the predawn darkness Ramananda, tripped upon him accidentally, and exclaimed *Ram, Ram*.

Kabir took that as the mantra, and Ramananda when apprised of the whole fact, accepted him as his disciple. Yet, whether the two men ever met or not is a matter for speculation. Kabir's poetry however, is full of exhortations to recite the name of Ram to devote oneself to Ram over and above everything else. Kabir's Ram (as a reading of his *dohas* reveals), is not the Ram of Ayodhya in Ramayana. Rather he uses the term as a synonym for God as the following verse will illustrate:

You simple minded people!
 as water enters water, so Kabir
 will meet with dust
**'That Maithili pandit said
 you'd die near Maghar.
 What a terrible place to be dead!
 If you want Ram to take you away,
 die somewhere else instead.**
 Besides, they say
 whoever dies at Maghar
 comes back a donkey.

So much for your faith in Ram.
 What's Kashi? Maghar? Barren ground,
 when Ram rules in your heart. If you give up the ghost in Kashi
 is there some debt
 on the Lord's part?
 (Tr. Hess & Singh 75-76) [Emphasis mine]

In yet another poem in the *Bijak*, Kabir debunks ritual and the blind devotion of established opinion. "Is there any guru in the world / wise enough to understand the upside-down Veda?" A thoroughbred iconoclast, Kabir's poems project a tumbled world which has lost its natural order:

Cow ate lion, deer ate cheetah,
 Crow pounced on falcon, quail conquered hawk,
 mouse ate cat, the dog jackal.
He who knows the primal teaching

Is dressed right.....

Kabir shouts

both together one!

Kabir made no distinction between Hinduism and Islam – they being mere mental and cultural outfits. He called himself the child of both and strove all his life to reconcile the differences between the two. Ironically, soon after his passing away, his Hindu and Muslim followers fought over how to dispose of his body. The Hindus wished to cremate, the Muslims, to bury it. But when the sheet covering the dead body was removed, nothing but a heap of flowers was found. The Hindus took half of them and burnt them in Banaras, while the Muslims buried the other half in Maghar.

Kabir did not codify his doctrine in the form of a book. He was fond of oral teachings in the form of small poems, which were later collected in the *Bijak* in the sixteenth century. Another book in which many of his poems find place is the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs, which has mystical and religious verse by Nanak and the nine Sikh Gurus and also the verse of their contemporary (mostly sixteenth century) Saints, Sufis and Bards

Another advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, who also happened to be a disciple of Ramananda like Kabir, was Ravidas, a cobbler – the great saint of north India, whose profession required him to work daily with the hides of dead animals. “O well born of Banaras, I too am born well known: / My labour is with leather. But my heart can boast the Lord.” Ravidas was a poet and a singer and the hymns he sang had such a ring of truth that eventually the Brahmins who came to hear them in fact became his disciples and would bow before him “in a total inversion of protocol”. He was however not unaware of his social status and this perception made him empathize with every cobbler and scavenger of the world. And he rallied against anyone who treated another person with disgust and disrespect. In the following verse, composed in raga Basant, Ravidas rebukes the human preoccupation with vainglorious pursuits:

You know nothing, ignorant Man.

Appraising yourself

you glow with pride

Such a bride is unwelcome.

Over her neck caws the crow of death

O you vainglorious fool
like the mushroom of *Bhadon*
you are even more short-lived.

Like the deer who knows not
that the fragrance of the musk
lies coiled within

So does the Lord live within
Understand this secret
and you shall never
fear death
(Tr. Myself **Granth Sahib** 3944)

The above verse is one of the many verses by Ravidas included in the **Adi Granth** (or the **Granth Sahib**, as the Sikhs call it). As Hawley and Juergensniyer observe in **Songs of the Saints of India**:

It is commonly accepted that Nanak and Ravidas were contemporaries who met at a place in Benaras that is fittingly called, Guru Bagh – the Guru's Garden – but the estimation of who learned more from whom depends upon whether one is primarily a follower of Nanak or of Ravidas. Ravidas's Bhakti, then, is an answer to caste Hinduism, but not explicitly a call for its reform. Even though he speaks of a kingdom 'where none are third or second – all are one', and where the residents 'do this or that, they walk where they wish', still he admits that it is his 'distant home' and he issues no direct call for realizing it here on earth.(17)

Truly enough, lofty and beautifully spiritual is the vision of this great saint poet. To read the following lines alone is like tonic . "Brother, says Ravidas, the world's a game, a magic show,/ and I'm in love with the gamester,/ the magician who makes it go "

Another great saint of medieval India, though differing in some respects from the views of Ramananda, Kabir , Ravidas and Nanak, was Sri Krishna Chaitanya from West

Bengal (1486-1533 A.D). He was a school teacher running his own Sanskrit *tol* (i.e. school) . His original name was Vishvambhara . He had migrated from Sylhet (East Bengal) and settled in Navadvipa in West Bengal. At the age of twenty two, when Vishvambhara visited Ganga to offer oblations to his deceased father, he met a recluse named Ishwarpuri, who gave him the Krishna mantra . This changed the whole tenor of his life . He became a devotee intoxicated upon Lord Krishna . Wrapped in mystic and emotional experience he would repeat the name of Krishna, sing, laugh, weep, rave and often fall into a trance . Soon a band of disciples – including the famous Advaita and Nityananda – had gathered around him. And.

A new type of emotional and devotional singing, called kirtana, often consisting of merely recitation of the names of Han and Krishna, and sung in chorus to the accompaniment of loud instrumental music, became the regular feature of religious life. Huge processions of kirtana parties paraded the streets of Navadvipa, with Vishvambhara and his prominent followers at the head, singing and dancing wildly in a mood of ecstasy. ("The Delhi Sultanate" 566)

Such public display of excessive emotional orgy was ultimately prohibited by the then Muslim governor. After some passive resistance, the practice of religious processions diminished. Vishvambhara took to Sanyasa in January, 1510 A.D., and came to be known as Sri Krishna Chaitanya. At the request of his mother he desisted from settling in Vrindavan — the land of Lord Krishna's childhood — and took up permanent residence nearer home, at Puri.

Hereafter began his extensive pilgrimages to the South, the West, and lastly the North of India upto Vrindavan. The new cult of Vaishnavism propounded by Chaitanya had become highly popular among the masses. It came to be known as the Vrindavan school of Bhakti, since it was at the insistence of Chaitanya that Vrindavan (a forgotten holy site), was converted into a religious centre. In the last phase of his life, Chaitanya remained at Puri and spent his time preaching amidst frequent religious trances and divine ecstasies. He was saturated with the Radha-Krishna cult and evidently, influenced by the passionate romantic poems of Jayadev, and the melodious songs of Chandidasa — both of whom celebrate the love of Radha and Krishna . Perhaps, no other religious saint stretched the analogy of lover and the beloved (God), to such emotional lengths as Chaitanya did. But his love had nothing physical in it. Chaitanya put it on a high

spiritual plane, and guarded against its degeneration into sensuality. He forbade his followers any kind of social intercourse with women. He did not give much weight to knowledge, but stressed upon sincere zeal and devotion and a passionate love for Hari as the only means of salvation. He was however, not a pure egalitarian where caste is concerned. His attitude towards rituals and idol worship was not as straight-forward either. And unlike most Bhakti saints who continued to be householders till the end, Chaitanya took to Sanyasism, later in life, and staunchly forbade any sort of dealings with the women folk. That he worshipped both Radha-Krishna as inseparable, is significant though. While the Ramananda school of Bhakti had found popular following in north India, the Vrindavana school of Sri Chaitanya made a profound mark upon the Bhakti cult of Gujarat. It greatly influenced Mirabai (1498-1546 A.D.), and Narasimha Mehta (1500-1580 A.D.), the two greatest exponents of Bhakti in sixteenth century Gujarat

Mira was born around 1498 A.D., as the only daughter of Ratan Singh, a Rajput noble of the house of Rathore. She lost her mother at a very early age, and was sent to her grandfather Rau Dudaji's palace in Merta, for better upbringing and care. Here, the little Mira grew up and merged naturally into Krishna Bhakti, for it was a family tradition. She also acquired knowledge of the Vedas, the Puranas and the Upanishads, an education in Sanskrit and the arts of music and dancing. In 1516 A.D. Mira was married to Prince Bhoja Raj, son and heir apparent of the Sisodiya family. Fortunately for Mira, the Sisodiyas were Vaishnava and Krishna bhaktas. Her father-in-law Rana Sanga's mother – Jhalli Rani – was a noted devotee, and a disciple of Sant Ravidas (also spelt as Raidas,) a low caste *Chamar* (i.e. a cobbler). According to some historic accounts Ravidas was Mirabai's spiritual preceptor. It was Jhalli Rani who initiated Mira into the practice of receiving Sadhus of the Sant school, as visitors, to enjoy their satsang. Mira continued the practice even after Jhalli Rani passed away. This attracted the displeasure of some members of the family.

Mira's troubles began after the death of Rana Sanga in the battle of Khanua, against the Mughal emperor Babur in 1527 A.D. A period of isolation followed. Eventually, she was driven to make a final and complete rejection of the values of the society in which she was brought up. She set off on her travels once again. She visited Vrindavan and later settled into worship at Dwarka, where she also breathed her last in 1546 A.D. According

to mythical accounts, she merged body and soul, into the idol of Lord Krishna in the temple, where she had been meditating one morning A song of Mira says:

The spring feast of colour,
with sprinkling and laughter,
tastes like the dust.

Empty the bed, the attic, the fields
My walk swings empty because
what weighed my heart is lost.

I fear to seek and fear

to think Counting and counting
each day, the lines on my
fingers are scraped.

The drums are playing, the
jhanjh, the flute, the one-
stringed lute The light rain

of spring has begun
but the dark one is from home

Says Meera, I wait.

life after life
I stand by the road

and look for a home

with my lord,

lifter

of the mountain (Tr. Shama Futehally 61-63)

Mira must have lived in the midst of a great devotional renaissance. Among her immediate forerunners could have been, Sant Ravidas, Kabir, Vidyapati, Chandidas and Narasimha Mehta, while her contemporaries (one assumes going by the dates), must have included Surdas, Nanak, and the early poets of the schools of Vallabhacharya (of Gujarat), and Sri Chaitanya (of West Bengal). The compositions of Mira were primarily meant for singing. As A J Alston comments "Tulsidas, surpassing even Surdas as the greatest devotional poet in Hindi, was probably born towards the later end of Meera's life-span... Clearly she was not Surdas's equal technically as a poet. [However,] In spirit they seem to stand close. Surdas painted scenes and incidents from the life of Krishna as a child and youth. Mira expressed a more personal association with the Lord" (20)

Here is a sample of their styles, the first poem being of Surdas, and the second Mira's :

(1)

If you drink the milk of the black cow, Gopal,
 you'll see your black braid grow .
 Little son, listen, among all the little boys
 you'll be the finest, most splendid one.
 Look at the other lads in Braj and see:
 its milk that brought them their strength.
 So drink: the fire daily burn in the bellies of you foes –
 Kans and Kesi and the Crane.'
 He takes a little bit, and tugs his hair a little bit
 to see if his mother's telling lies.
 Sur says, Yasoda looks at his face and laughs
 when he tries to coax his curls beyond his ear
 (Tr. J S Hawley 105)

(2)

I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh Rana,
 colored with the color of my lord
 Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,

dancing in the presence of the saints,
coloured with the colour of my lord

They thought me mad for the Maddening One,
raw for my dear dark love,
coloured with the colour of my lord.

The Rana sent me a poison cup
I didn't look, I drank it up,
coloured with the colour of my lord.

The clever mountain lifter is the lord of Mira.
Life after life he's true –
coloured with the colour of my Lord.
(Tr Chaturvedi ***Songs of the Saints of India*** 134)

Narasimha Mehta, (1414 – 1480 A.D) whom tradition regards as a forerunner of Mirabai, came from a high caste Nagar Brahmin family*(5). Orphaned at an early age, he grew up under the care of his elder brother. His associations with itinerant sadhus and pilgrims began from his childhood days. The desire for contact with the divine (whom he perceived in the image of Krishna), gathered momentum with passing years, until at a very young age, an experience at Dwarka, completely transformed Narasimha and made him a "poet of genius, a philosopher with a vision and a saint endowed with the overflowing love for God". "O Hari, in the whole universe, / you are the one reality, / varied and infinite, / you are the wind / you are the water, / you are the earth, mountain, / and the tree blossomed up to the sky " (Tr. Uma S. Deshpande ***Medieval Bhakti Movements in India*** 107). A married man with three children, the graph of Narasimha's domestic life (and domestic woes), echoes some facts from Tukaram's personal life. Of course, unlike the latter Narasimha Mehta was born of a high caste. He was a saint to the core. He used to frequent the hamlets of the pariahs, (for whom he had coined the term '*harijan*', meaning God's own people; later the term *harijan* was extensively used and popularised by Mahatma Gandhi). He would often sing along with them, *bhajans*, all night. In this, he was in the company of saints like Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya. As Deshpande comments:

his direct perception of the supercosmic divine dance, the total mingling of his personality into the divine form of the Lord Krishna and the experience of the divine grace in his life got him converged from a devotee to a philosopher, and from a philosopher to a mystic (112).

Besides these two great Vaishnava poets in Gujarat, there existed (i) Pipa, the ruler of a small principality who renounced worldly life, became the disciple of Ramananda and settled near Dwarka. He lived around 1430-1435 A.D. His verse finds a place of honour in the **Adi Granth**. So also the verse of Dadu. (ii) Dadu (1544-1603 A.D.), was the most celebrated disciple of Kabir. Born in Ahmedabad, he later settled in Narana, Rajasthan. Dadu like Kabir, worked towards religious syncretism, laying great stress upon Hindu-Muslim unity. With the help of his followers he compiled a book of religious literature which had a collection of devotional writings of various sects and several devotional hymns including those by Sufis like Kazi Kadam, Sheikh Farid, Kazi Mohammad, Sheikh Bahawad and many others. According to existing evidence, Manjula Bhattacharya says in "**Medieval Bhakti Movements in Gujarat**".

It was perhaps the first anthology in the religious literature of the world in which the views of a great variety of religious sects had been collected.

The second of this kind is probably the Granth Sahib which was compiled in A.D. 1604, one year after Dadu's death. (**Medieval Bhakti**

Movements in India 103)

Among the Hindu Bhakti poets that existed in the sixteenth century Gujarat-Rajasthan, were Bhan Saheb of Kathiawar (also a follower of Kabir), Namadev the cotton carder from Marwar; Lalbag who inspired the Alakhnamis sect in the Bikaner region, Laldasa of the Meo tribe of Rajasthan and founder of the Laldasi sect which was influenced by both Kabir and Dadu.

Another parallel stream of popular Bhakti in Gujarat was propagated by the sect of Vallabhacharya (1473-1531 A.D.). It had its largest following from among the rich trading and cultivator classes. The poet-saint Tulsidas belonged to the same sect. The Vallabha sect was very popular and spread widely in west India. But it could not sustain its vigour owing to the fact that leadership of the Vallabhacharya sect became the property of the descendents of the family of Vallabhacharya. This tendency of keeping the spiritual leadership within the family tree was strictly avoided by the poet-saint (and eventually

the first Sikh Guru), Nanak and his successor nine saints who, acquired the position solely on the basis of their spiritual greatness. This was one major reason that the Sikh torch of faith grew strong and blazed deep enough to eventually become the only political strong-arm in the North that could defend the cause of the Hindus in the face of Mughal oppression which climaxed during the rule of Aurangzeb.

The tradition that Dadu Dayal, the saint from Dwarka, had begun by compiling a book of religious literature (of both Bhakti and Sufi traditions), was carried further in medieval Gujarat, by the poet-saint Prannath who contributed considerably towards cementing the Hindus and Muslims, spiritually. The teachings of Sant Prannath were collected by his followers in the *Tartamya Sagar Granth* with immense reverence and devotion – exactly as they would treat the spiritual master in person. The Sikhs therefore were not the first of their kind, nor were they alone in the practice of worshipping and consulting a scripture, a Granth in the physical absence of their preceptor

Nanak (1469-1539 A.D.), the first Guru of the Sikhs, originally began as a Nirguna bhakta, in the footsteps of Kabir, and the two are perceived as the most famous bhaktas the lord ever produced. He was born in the town of Rai Bhoi di Talwandi, forty miles southwest of Lahore, in the Pakistan of today. His father was a *bedi khatri*, that is, a member of the merchant caste. He kept the town land-records for the regional ruler, Daulat Khan Lodi *(6). As a child Nanak was sent to study at a local Madarsa (i.e. a school). Right from the start, his unusual spells of silence were a cause for worry to his parents, who always kept trying to draw him out, to make him more gregarious and 'normal' like the other boys. In the same attempt they even got him married, early. Perhaps, the only person who really understood him was his sister – Bebe Nanki. The siblings shared a deep bond of affection. Nanak continued to resist taking up any of the occupations his family proposed for him and continued to keep to himself, wandering off with the Nath Yogis and Sufis in between, and meditating most of the time.

History recounts that Nanak's moment of blinding insight came one day as he bathed in the river Vein near the town of Sultanpur. His response was characteristic : he immediately left the job he had finally accepted, as a clerk in the court of the prince who ruled the area, and set out to wander as any Hindu ascetic or Muslim *faqir would*; encountering and conversing off and on with other holy men like Surdas, the Sufi Sheikh

Fand, and perhaps also, Kabir, among others Nanak's attitude towards his own unusual powers was that of indifference. The thrust being, not on the exhibition of one's powers (which only builds up ego and pride), but on totally surrendering to the divine within whom the devotee must merge finally, like all mystics.

Nanak's poetry reflects a deep love for nature and the cosmos, which are perceived as an extension of the divine order

A plate-like sky,
the sun and moon
its prayer lamps,
the milkyway, of pearls.
Incense is the sandal-tree
Its fragrance the breeze fans, constantly
And the lush green wealth of forests
makes flower-offering at God's feet

How beautiful is your prayer service!

.....

Your soul, the soul of all life-form,
Your flame flickers, bright
in all that lives

The Guru's guidance is the match-stick

Thus lit alone

the Arti completes

(Tr. Myself)

Kabir and Nanak both lived in northern India and belonged to the generation that saw the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the next. They were there, when the wave of Bhakti, begun far back in the eighth century, climaxed. As Shama Futehally mentions in her Introduction to the book *In The Dark Of The Heart*, "Their mystical wisdom and pathos seeped deep into the Indian psyche. 'The river and the wave are one', he sang. 'Where is the difference?' To this day, Kabir's name is synonymous with Hindu-Muslim unity. His vision of unity was rooted in the genuine religious belief of the

bhakta. The same ground was shared by Kabir's younger contemporary Nanak. He went even further than Kabir in challenging the barriers of religious difference, declaring, "There is no Hindu or Muslim. So whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path " (34) The quest of Nanak led later to the formation of a third religion, the Sikh religion. What makes them both so interesting is, the culturally rich and potentially stimulating times in which they lived. In the next chapter we shall attempt to explore the thread and weave of the same.

While discussing in some detail, poets like Baba Farid, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Ravidas, Nanak, Narasimha Mehta, Dadu Dayal and Mirabai, this chapter has attempted a cultural and political survey of North India during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It has also explored the areas of exchange between Sufi and Bhakti mysticism – a concern we will deal with in greater detail later. The next two chapters will explore the context of the fourteenth-fifteenth century North India, in which Kabir and Nanak lived. Simultaneously, it will also examine the nature of the poetry these two poets composed, and the Sant ethos which became concretised through it.

Collectively, the first three chapters sum up the broader context of the Bhakti movement, which appears as a single continuous phenomenon – an alternative to living – that continued to derive momentum (during its spread through the centuries,) from its involvement with the changing needs of time. We can say that the Bhakti genre was a spiritually uplifting and enriched cultural response/ resistance to the new mask of oppression. Although the Bhakti movement popularised itself with the marginalised segments of society, it was initiated (both in the South and North of India), by enlightened Brahmins like Nammalvar and Ramanand, who saw it also as a means of inducing a degree of catholicity and humanism in the otherwise frigid structure of Hinduism.

Notes

(1) As Alberuni, the Mughal traveller to India in A D. 1030, recounts, "...the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-concerted, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course from any foreigner If they travelled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is." (22-23) "The Brahmans teach the Veda to the Kshatriyas. The latter learn it but are not allowed to teach it, not even to a Brahman. The Vaishya and Shudra are not allowed to hear it, much less to pronounce and recite it. If such a thing can be proved against one of them, the Brahmans drag him before the magistrate and he is punished by having his tongue cut off " (125)

(2) The rich
 will make temples for Shiva.
 What shall I,
 a poor man,
 do?
 My legs are pillars,
 The body the shrine,
 the head a cupola
 of gold.
 Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
 things standing shall fall,
 but the moving ever shall stay.
 (Basavanna Tr. A.K. Ramanujan 19)

(3) Before him in the twelfth century Ramanuja had tried to relax the orthodoxy and element of snobbery attached to Vaishnavism

(4) Sample poems of some of Ramananda's disciple , from the **Granth Sahib**:

(a)

When there was egoism within
 thou were not Now that thou art there,
 egoism is naught
 As huge waves raised by the winds
 in the great ocean
 are only water in water
 What shall I say, O Lord,
 about this delusion?
 What we deem a thing to be,
 in reality is not (Ravidas)

(b)

In the body, the Lord is present
 The body is His temple
 In the body is the place, of pilgrimage
 of which I am a pilgrim

In the body are incense,
 earthen lamps, and oblation
 In the body, the leaf offering

I have searched many regions, and found
 only in the body,
 the nine treasures

(c)

I offer adoration and prayer,
 with incense lamps and clarified butter
 I am,
 a sacrifice unto the Lord Lakshmi
 Hail to thee Lord, hail!
 Thine is eternal bliss
 Sovereign Lord, Emperor!
 The Lord's meditation, Rama Nand
 my Guru knows
 He describes Him as Omnipresent
 the Embodiment, of Supreme joy
 The world's Master of fascinating form
 has ferried me across the terrible world ocean
 (Sena)

There is no coming
 no going (Pipa)

(d)

Your devotional service I perform
 O Lord, arranger of our affairs
 Pulses flour ghee footwear, good,
 and corn of seven sorts I beg of thee
 The milch cow and buffalo and also
 a good Turkistani mare

Thy slave Dhanna O Lord,
 begs Thee to procure them
 (Dhanna)

(5) According to modern history, Narasimha Mehta lived between 1500 to 1580 A.D.,
 which makes him a contemporary of Mira

(6) Punjab was under the Lodi rule during Nanak's lifetime (i.e. 1469 to 1539 A.D.). At
 the time of his birth, Bahlol Lodi (1451-1489 A.D.), was in power. He was succeeded
 by his son Sikandar Lodi in 1489 A.D. and in 1517 A.D. Sikandar's son, Ibrahim Lodi
 took over. He ruled from 1517 to 1526 A.D.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Kabir the Mystic : A Poetics of Polyphony

Kabir descended from heaven to earth. The lotus flower was blooming in the place where Kabir was born. The bees were tired of humming. Peacocks, larks and other kinds of birds in their flight passed circling around the tank. Thunder and lightning were in the air when Kabir became manifest in the heart of a lotus flower, in the midst of the Lahar tank. A feeling of thirst overcame Nima, the newly wedded bride of Niru, the weaver, as after the marriage ceremony she was making her way to her husband's house. She approached the tank but was much afraid when there she beheld the child. She thought in her heart 'this is probably the living evidence of the shame of some virgin widow.' Niru suggested that they might take the child to their house, but Nima at first demurred, thinking that such action might give rise to scandal. Women would ask, 'Who is the mother of a child so beautiful that its eyes are like the lotus?' However laying aside all fears they took pity on the child. On approaching the house, they were welcomed with the songs of women, but when the women saw the child, dark thoughts arose in their hearts and they began to ask, 'How has she got this child?' Nima replied that she had got the child without giving birth to it and the women refrained from asking further questions.

The mystery surrounding the birth of the child was further deepened when Niru called in a Qazi and requested him to open the Koran and find for the child a name. He found the name Kabir, and also from the same root, Akbar, Kubra, and Kibriya. On finding these names the Qazi was bewildered and bit his nails, for was not the term Kabir a title applied to God? (G. H. Westcott 4)

Thus goes the most poetic (not the most fantastic), of the various versions surrounding the birth of Kabir -- one of the greatest mystic poets of the Bhakti movement of medieval India. Most of the legends regarding Kabir's birth were the likely outcome of

the Kabir Panthis efforts to bring Kabir under the fold of Hinduism. (Kabir Panthis being, the formally recognised followers of Kabir's teachings, and members of the Kabir Panth.) Since the fact that Kabir grew up in a Muslim weaver's household in Benaras, is irrevocable, the legends generally narrate that Kabir's natural mother was a virgin Brahmin widow. To erase the obvious factor of illegitimacy attached to his birth, they add that he was begot as the result of an ascetic's blessing, not from the virgin's womb but from the palm of her hand. The ascetic is often quoted as Ramananda himself. Some legends, like the poetic account narrated at the beginning, completely rule out even the role of a woman. They claim that Kabir was the divine light of the *Sat Purush* that descended in the Kaliyuga (as the fourteenth incarnation) on the full moon day of *Jyeshtha* (second month according to Bengali calender), in the year 1455 of the Vikrama era, at Lahar Talaab near Kashi (Benaras). The Muslim followers of Kabir on the other hand completely deny the theory that Kabir was brought up by foster parents, who were Muslim weavers. They assert that Kabir was the naturally born son of the Muslim couple Nima and Niru. In the absence of any reliable source of information , the debate is simply an unending tussle.

Any attempts to dig further for details are only confronted by a maze of unhistorical writing, legends and a few historical facts and dates. Even the year of his birth and death lack sufficient evidence in history , thus giving rise to numerous versions and theories.

(a) A large number of traditional historians are agreed upon 1398 A.D. as the year of his birth and the year 1518 A.D. as the year of his death. This allows the great poet a good span of hundred and twenty years of life. It also accommodates three major propositions, first that he was a disciple of Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.)*(2) , secondly that he was a contemporary of the Emperor Sikander Lodi (1489 to 1517 A.D.) , and thirdly, that Kabir and Nanak (1469 to 1539 A.D.) were contemporaries, the latter being his disciple*(3). (b) The other likely period of Kabir's life span is 1338 to 1448 A.D. It supports the assumption that Kabir was Ramananda's contemporary and disciple (which again is quite unlikely). (c) However the years most accepted by recent research, and also backed by historical evidence, are 1440 to 1518 A.D.

Putting aside the uncertainty that surrounds the issue of dates and years ; and quitting all attempts at dating Kabir, we can at best take stock of the following with some certainty: (a) that Kabir was found in the Lahar Talaab by a Muslim weaver-couple, Niru

and Nima who brought him up , and they all lived in Benaras. As regards the rest of the stories, their legendary character is clear. As Hedayatullah says, Kabir (1440 to 1518 A.D.) was an abandoned child, probably because of the illegitimacy of his birth. (b) The period of Kabir's life-span that commands popular acceptance and is in circulation among scholars is, 1398 to 1448 A.D. , and 1440 to 1518 A.D.

Tracing the saga of Arab and Turk raids upon the Indian subcontinent we find that the first forays of Muslim soldiers into India were in the year 712 A.D., in the province of Sindh. These began as looting expeditions but quickly turned into a full scale invasion. The raids and loot campaigns of Mahmud of Ghazni upon the Indian subcontinent, ended in 1030 A.D. with the death of Mahmud. To the myopic visioned kings of India, the Turk noble from Ghazni was just another *Mlechcha* as had been the Shakas and Huns a few centuries ago. They had come, plundered, and after a while, disappeared. What they did not realise was that Mahmud Ghazni's raids upon the north and north-west of India, had paved the way for further attacks from aspiring Turks, Afghan and Mongolian nobles, desirous of expanding their boundaries, or of setting up new empires.

The saga of Islamic advent and settlement in the Indian subcontinent began in earnest with the invasion led by Muhammad Ghuri at the end of the twelfth century. The Afghan came to India with the intention of establishing an empire and expanding the limits of his original kingdom back home. By 1192 A.D. he had conquered the Indus valley and the rich regions of Punjab, Lahore and Delhi. His assassination later in 1206 A.D. did not result in the withdrawal of Turk and Afghan armies. It only marked the beginning of the Delhi Sultanate or the rule of the Turkish and Afghan Sultans. The thirteenth century Delhi Sultanate was to witness intense political activity and intrigue. While the Islamic impact was felt in different ways by the Indian society at large, at the higher rungs, treachery seems to have been the order of the day, as one sultan after another fell prey to political intrigue and was either assassinated or severely duped by his close confidante in his hour of need. Thus we have the Slave Dynasty founded by Qutub-ud-din Aibak. It ended in 1265 A.D. with the assassination of Queen Raziya Sultan (Aibak's brilliant niece).

Around 1290 A.D another group of Turks – the Khaljis came to power. By this time the levying of the *jaziya* (the tax on non-Muslims) had become a reality, to escape which many Hindus began converting to Islam. By 1320 A.D. the Khalji dynasty gave way to the Tughlaq line of rulers who ruled ruthlessly but well, for about a span of eighty years. This was also the time when the influx of Sufis was on the ascent and saints like Namdev who spent twenty years in Punjab*(4), and Ramananda of Benaras were working with a missionary zeal.

On the north-west Indian border, the Mongols had been threatening to invade from time to time. They had been successfully kept at bay by the Tughlaq dynasty. However in 1398 A.D., the Mongols under the leadership of Timur at last broke through North India. After sacking Delhi, Timur left for Central Asia, leaving behind a nominee to rule over Punjab. The nominee in Timur's absence, seized the opportunity, captured Delhi and became the founding Sultan of the Sayyid Dynasty. The Sayyids ruled over North and Central India until the earlier half of the fifteenth century. Coincidentally it was also the period that saw the Sant and Sufi movements in India, climax. Such was the political backdrop of the times in which our revolutionary/reformist poets Kabir and Nanak lived. These were the times when both Islam and Brahminism in North India were challenged and ridiculed for their ungodly sentiments of fanaticism and ritual.

The unscrupulous razing down of Hindu temples; the levying of the *jaziya* tax and other such unjust measures towards the Hindus had weakened the common man's resolve to stick to the religion of his ancestors. It anyway offered him little beyond an inferior status, spiritual starvation, and expensive ritual. Often even that was not accessible. As a result, this period saw mass conversions of lower caste Hindus into casteless Muslims. The converts were a section of society that was Hindu in its bearing but Muslim in its identity, following the newly-embraced festivals, dress-code, and the new God Allah, along with their ages old plethora of Hindu deities, customs and food habits. There was thus a large section of people who were both Hindu or Muslim or put differently, a people who were neither Hindu nor Muslim. (Kabir belonged to that same group. We will discuss that later.) They the common masses were potential swimmers (followers) who took to the mystic streams of Sufism and Bhakti, as they flowed across the country, fertilising in their sway the spirit and literature of India.

The Saints made no tall demands on the common man. They spoke of a religion of love, of a God who resided in the temple of the heart. Such an arrangement was very convenient and desirable during the times when political instability, forced conversions and violence of all sorts, were rampant. The emotional appeal, spiritual richness of the experience, the simplification of the divine, the rhythm and joy of community-singing (*bhajan-kirtan*), which elevated and refined the individual through great poetry and also provided therapeutic release, provided the people with a life-line to hold on to, in the suffusing darkness that had otherwise ravaged them. As William Dwyer observes in

Bhakti In Kabir :

National consciousness, love of country and pride of freedom were smothered under the weight of a mass of rituals and social connections, a petty-minded vanity and narrow selfishness as the Muslim power was consolidated the clash between expanding Islam with its official patronage and Hinduism, was to aggravate social and religious unrest in northern India. (9)

The *julaha* community of weavers in which Kabir was raised was one such section of Hindus who had converted to Islam, but whose process of conversion was still incomplete. Dwyer holds such transitional circumstances as responsible for the anti-Islamic stance that Kabir took despite being raised in a Muslim family. This must have been one of the factors, not the only factor responsible. A much higher sense of the divine or a heightened insight into the secular nature of the divine could have been the guiding factor as well. Nanak who was born a Hindu, but opposed Hindu rituals and resisted initiation during the thread ceremony is a similar example. Dwyer's theory would not stand good in his case :

Yet, for a man like Kabir, apparently born in a Muslim family, to indulge in such vitriolic criticism of Islamic practices as he did, with seeming impunity, and still to identify himself with traditional Hindu society, argues strongly for a less clear cut dichotomy between communities and beliefs than we know today, and perhaps, too, for a degree of overlapping of communities by those who willy-nilly had a foot in both camps, or found themselves in a sort of religious no-man's-land. (10)

The following is a poem of Kabir, set in the musical measure (*raga*) of *Bilawal*, from the **Adi Granth**

This weaver is forever
 fetching his clay-pot,
 forever plastering his kitchen
 He cares not for his loom or shuttle,
 He is raptured by the bliss of saying
 'Hari, Hari'.

In our family, whoever said 'Ram'?
 Ever since this son of mine
 has gotten hold of a rosary,
 we've had no peace

.....

The Swami of all bliss
 is the one Hari;
 my guru has given me His name.
 He preserved the honour of Saint Prahlada,
 and nipped apart Hamakhasa
 with His claws.

I have abandoned the household gods
 and the traditions of my fathers.
 I have been given the Word by my guru.

Kabir says,
 'He smashes all sin,
 He saves His saints'.
 (Tr. Nirmal Dass 177-178)

Scholarship is agreed upon the fact that Kabir's weaver clan must have been of very low caste Hindu weavers, who had undergone conversion just a few generations before

Kabir's birth. Some believe that they had belonged to the Kon caste of weavers. Their statement is based on two factors: (i) that Kabir not only calls himself a Julaha, but at times also a Kori, and (ii) secondly, even today a good number of Koris are Kabir Panthis. Another opinion that many more scholars hold is that these particular Julahas were originally those Nath yogis⁽⁵⁾ who had deviated from the strict Nath code of celibacy and entered the practice of wedlock. As critics like Dr. Dvivedi, Kshitimohan Sen, and William Dwyer point out, Hindu weavers are found at a variety of caste levels including some who, especially in Bengal, call themselves Jugis or Yogis. Kshitimohan Sen in his work (in Bengali), on *Medieval Mysticism*, identifies them as the Nath Yogis:

.. in the early days of Muslim conquest many Naths became Muslims and Julahas. These Yogis who are said to have forsaken the strict celibate state of the Nath sect, and to have married, were for this reason regarded as of very low status in Hindu society, though as Naths they really fell outside the pale of caste, and even prior to conversion to Islam they had rejected caste, and Brahman domination. . . There are many facts that incline us to think that the Julahas into which Kabir was born were married Yogis of the Nath persuasion who had become Muslims. (Tr. Manmohan Ghosh 15)

One is inclined to believe the above theory, for it answers a lot of questions regarding Kabir's parentage. I am personally inclined to believe that Kabir was born in the house of a Julaha couple – Niru and Nima – both of whom were more Hindu than Muslim in their faith. Their ancestral history of a dialogue with spirituality and yoga explains a good deal about Kabir's stronger attachment with the traditional Hindu faith, his immense familiarity and respect for the virtues of yogic practices, and his refreshingly original semiotics weaving an interesting text of symbols absorbed from the system of Nath yoga. The influence of the Nath cult was a shared heritage of the Sant tradition beginning with Namdev. A good deal of Nath semiotics appears in the prosody of Nanak's verse as well. The yogic cult therefore, is important for our study. As William Dwyer comments:

Kabir not only showed considerable familiarity with it, but displayed great respect for the famous yogi, Matsyendranath and his renowned disciple, Gorakhnath. Gorakhnath had lived in the second half of the ninth

century, . [and] . he probably never had a more discerning admirer than the weaver of Benaras who was able to adopt much of his spiritual technique, while rejecting by and large , the aims of the technique (12)

The following Sakhis are from *The Bijak Of Kabir*, (which is another reliable source of his works today) They illustrate Kabir's involvement with the culture of yoga

38

Snake coiled round the sandal tree.

What can the sandal do?

Every pore choked with poison –
where can nectar go?

42

Flickering, struggling, swaying –
no one is left out.

Gorakh got stuck in Death City.

So who's a yogi?

(93-94)

Kabir's references to yoga in his poetry signify that he took his practice of yoga seriously, that he actually experienced some of the marvellous effects of it as described in yoga literature. (His reference to poison and nectar in the sakhi above is one example). But, as is characteristic of Kabir's Bhakti – all else is subordinate to, and used as a means to, his union with Ram. It matters little to Kabir, how the mystical system hangs together and he uses the yoga terminology, modifies it and consecrates it only to express the idea of merging with Ram. The nectar in Kabir's language becomes the "liquor," the essence, of "Ram".

Some prominent symbols in the yogic text of signification are, (a) the reversal of the man and, (b) the inverted thousand-petaled lotus in the cranium from which the nectar of immortality drips . Drinking the ambrosial nectar dripping from the lotus is supposed to give immortality to the yogi For Kabir, who is not interested in immortality, that nectar is

the way to union with Ram. Often the yogic symbol of the thousand-petaled lotus is also replaced with (c) the metaphor of the sky, to denote the highest point of yogic recession. And lastly (d), the reference to the 'three strand snare', meaning the three *gunas* (i.e. aspects or qualities) of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (representing subtlety, action and grossness respectively) In the following shabad (i.e. a poem meant to be sung), Kabir plays specifically on the above listed symbol (a), and the result is poetry that is sublime in its very conception.

Saints once you wake up don't doze off.
 Time can't eat you, eons can't swallow you,
 age and decay can't waste you
 Turned around Ganga dries up the ocean,
 swallows the moon and sun
 A sick man rests, having toppled nine houses
 A shadow burns on the water

 Turned = around rabbit swallows a lion. ..
 An upside- down pot won't go under,
 a straight pot fills with water
Turned around earth pierces the sky,
 the great being speaks
 Without a cup nectar is sipped,
 Streams swell with water.
 Kabir says, he lives from age to age
 who tastes the liquor of Ram. (*Bijak* 41)

In yet another fine reference to symbol (b), the poet writes :

In the middle of the sky temple
 blooms a flower.
 Its petals are down
 and its roots are up
 No tilling, sowing, or watering,
 no shoots or leaves-

just a flower
 Beautifully it blossoms, beautifully
 the garden-maker ties her knots
 If it is destroyed
 the bee despairs.

Kabir says, listen saints
 the pandits are greedy
 for that flower (*Bijak* 62)

Sometimes Kabir tropes upon the symbol of nectar/ water . The same troping upon is seen in the poetry of Nanak as well. In fact troping is one of the most powerful tools available to poetry, and particularly to mystic poetry which must convey and construct meaning more by suggestion (or *lakshana* - the term used in Indian poetics), than by statement. B. K. Matilal in his book, *The Word And The World*, refers to the three broad techniques employed by the mystics of India, "to express the ineffable". They are : (1) employment of unusual metaphors and symbolic language that facilitates transcendence, (2) the use of contradictory predicates and paradoxical statements in order to characterise the experience of what is experienced. And lastly, (3) to communicate the ineffable by using the *neti neti* method of negative dialectics, "...it is believed that if this is done repeatedly several times with a variety of possible descriptions, the general idea will get across" (152). While the first two devices are found profusely in Kabir's poetic, in Nanak's poetry we find the first and third approaches more often. In the following poem for instance, we find Kabir using the most surreal of metaphors and bizarre ideas to create an otherwise ungraspable mystic experience.

...The world is overflowing
 with that water.
 The water where sound and sea
 divide, where Vedas
 and six rites are born,
 where dwell
 both god and soul,
 that water holds earth,

sky and light
 The water from which all bodies spring –
 who knows its secret?
 Not even Kabir. (*Bijak* 64-65)

The style of the verse above is very similar to the characteristic style of Nanak's poetry, and the way it ends is typical too. The term that Nanak uses most frequently for the divine is "Har", while for Kabir it is generally "Ram". It is always Ram and his love that Kabir seeks. His treatment of the yogic states of *Pranayam* and *Samadhi*, which is withdrawal from the physical reality, is also of the same nature. All aspects of yogic states and of yogic asceticism are utilised to refurbish the story of Ram, the King

Meditation and worship
 are my earrings,
 true concepts, my begger's blanket.
 In the silent cave,
 I sit in a yogic posture;
 forsaking the world is my sect.

My King, I am the yogi of love;
 I grieve neither at death nor separation.

I blow my conch
 in all the religions of the world;
 this burning world is my ash-pouch.
 Up-ending triple Maya is my yogic posture;
 therefore I am saved,
 though I am a householder.

I have made heart and breath
 my two lyre gourds,
 aeons are this lyre's neck
 Its durable strings
 never break

This lyre plays without being touched

Hearing it, my heart
becomes intoxicated
I am not touched by surging Maya
Kabir says, 'The ascetic
who plays this game
will not be born again ' (*Adi Granth* 83)

The above verse is set in raga Gaun , and has been translated by Nirmal Das in *The Songs Of Kabir* a collection of Kabir's verse from the *Adi Granth*. Kabir's verse in the *Adi Granth* has a certain softness about it, while poems collected in the *Bijak* are harsher and more aggressive in their aspect. (Since the source of Kabir's poetry is important for the purpose of our study, the poems I have taken from Nirmal Das's translations, I shall denote, along with the page number, as from the *Adi Granth*.)

Kabir's abundant use of the Nath terminology adds to the mystical strength of his verse. In the following sakhis we find his description of the ultimate Brahman , "the bodiless man", with a reference to the "thousand-petaled lotus" in the "cranium", and the metaphor of the "sky" signifying the ultimate mystic experience:

347

He has no shape or line,
no flesh no base
In the middle of the sky-temple,
see the bodyless man.

348

Meditated in the sky,
opened the thunderbolt door,
saw his own reflection.
The three filled with joy (*Bijak* 130)

The reference to the “thunderbolt door” is a reference to the *kundalini* – to the awakening of the serpentine energy coiled at the base of the spine. Coming to the last metaphor, the symbol of the three *gunas* has its house in the *Samkhya* metaphysics which, along with Buddhist philosophy, makes the foundation of the Nath cult. According to the *Samkhya Upanishad*, reality has two aspects, the *purush* (male principal signifying the spiritual), and *prakriti* (the female principal signifying material reality – maya). What constitutes *prakriti* is, the three *gunas* (essences) of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*:

Reality

<i>Purush</i>	+	<i>Prakriti</i>
represents		represents
<u>Divinity</u>		<u>Material Reality</u> , which is made up of <i>Sattva + Rajas + Tamas.</i>

The *guna* are the three qualities which permeate all matter in varying degrees: *sattva* (means light, goodness), *rajas* (means action, passion), and *tamas* (signifies dullness, darkness, sluggishness) They are also virtues, stages and levels of being. The various ways in which these *gunas* intermingle is responsible for the variety, multiplicity and differentiation we find in reality. These *gunas* are subtle though wholly material constituents of reality. The Indian science of medicine – Ayurveda, is also based on the physiological balance/imbalance of *gunas*. In this way Kabir puts the three *gunas* outside the concept of Ram. In theological parlance, *guna* occurs most frequently in compounds (*Saguna* and *Nirguna*), in the perennial debate as to whether to perceive the supreme being as *Saguna* (i.e. having *gunas* – attributes), or as *Nirguna* (i.e. having no guns or attributes of material reality). Kabir however, often addresses the supreme being as Ram, or by other synonymous attributes:

On the moonless day, give up longing
Remember Ram who knows our innermost thoughts
While living, find salvation's door:
Perceive the real Word and Source of all things.

When you love Gobind's lotus like feet,
Your heart becomes pure, by the grace of saints

Stay awake day and night
and sing Han's praise (*Adi Granth* 117)

The Sant tradition to which Kabir and Nanak belonged, distinguishes itself from the Bhakti movement at large by its complete denial of ritual and idol worship, its insistence on the formlessness of God, and its *Nirguna* Bhakti (which essentially perceives God as a formless, one, universal being/spirit/essence)

O Nirgun,
to whom can I tell your tale?
who can be so wise?
Kabir says
'Only those who ignite
see the flash.' (*Adi Granth* 75)

He predicates other *gunas* of Ram (like omnipresence, limitlessness, flawlessness, etc. and also finally the focal point into which all creation tends in its cosmic denouement), but not the three *gunas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These attributes belong to the realm of Maya and to the possessor of Saguna. Kabir says: "The three worlds are in these fifty-two letters: / All things are in them. / These letters will pass away - / but the letter for Him is not among these " (*Adi Granth* 107) In this way he distances them from the concept of Ram, and makes them subject to His will, as is the rest of this transient world.

Ram, Ram, so fearless are You
that You Yourself become the raft
in order to save us.

When I exist
you do not;
now you exist
and I do not.
Now you and I are One
seeing us unite,
my heart is filled with pleasure.

When I have wisdom

I have no strength,
 now I have neither wisdom
 nor strength

Kabir says,
 My wisdom was snatched away
 and transformed –
 and I was perfected (*Adi Granth* 101-102)

It is easy and safe to conjecture that with the influence of Samkhya on Kabir, arrived the channel of influence of yogis of the Nath cult, with whom he seems to ascertain the exact extent of his acquaintance with Samkhya, but as is evident from his poetry, he understood enough of the theory to exclude the three *gunas* from his concept of the Divine Being, and to favour the term *Nirguna* when referring to Him. So far it appears that although Kabir's verse describes Ram as having attributes, from time to time, it is done more in a poetic/ figurative sense – in a moment of profuse love and devotion, as an endearment. Rather than saying (as many researchers do), that Kabir was expressing the sentiment of Bhakti, under the Vaishnava influence, or that Kabir's Ram is *Saguna* in concept, I would like to look at it as another incident of how Kabir used the mystic terminology and theological forms of expression available to him, to further his vision of the divine and to implement his idea of inter-textuality in poetry:

Lanka for a castle,
 the ocean for a moat –
 still, nothing remains
 of Ravana's household.

What shall I ask for? Nothing endures.
 My eyes see the world pass away.

... ..

If by the guru's grace,
 Ram's name is inside you,
 you shall never wander from birth to birth,
 you shall become steadfast.

discussed briefly in chapter three, section one, the spiritual career of Ramananda and his relationship with Kabir, I will not repeat myself here. Rather I shall explore, the possibility of Kabir's having been a disciple of Ramananda, and examine the extent of the latter's influence on him. The promotion of Ram-Bhakti in the north we know is attributed to Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.). He is also known to have founded his own sect, the Ramavat sect. The issue that makes his clique of disciples somewhat controversial, stems from the uncertainty surrounding his life span. Suspicion surrounds the largely proposed year of his death. Scholarship suspects he was deliberately updated, to allow credence to legends that declare that Kabir (born 1398 A.D.), was his disciple. The problem is further compounded by the same vagueness about Kabir's dates. More recent scholars as a result, are inclined to think that any connection between Kabir and Ramananda can neither be proved nor disproved for want of sufficient historical evidence.

However, there is enough historical evidence to prove that Ramananda was a spiritual genius, and a path breaker. Otherwise, fed upon Ramanuja's tradition of Vaishnava Bhakti, and upon the concept of *avatarvada*, he (a Vaishnav Brahmin) could not have deviated from the beaten track to propagate the liberation of religion that he had pioneered. Perhaps the instinct for reformation emerged from his own religious environment and from the example of the Bhakti movement in Tamilnadu and Karnataka during the eighth to twelfth century period. (The Tamil Alvars and Shaivites, faced by the challenge Jainism posed to Hinduism, had undertaken the task of reforming the Hindu faith, suffering in the cesspool of ritual and caste barriers.) Muslim rule and the *jaziya* tax, in North India had become a reality. The period witnessed the constant tossing/ snatching of power among the Turks, Afghans and the Mongols. As one dynasty after another succeeded to grab the Delhi Sultanate, either through political intrigue, homicide, or treachery on the battleground; Ramananda along with Namdev (and other less known bhaktas), was among the first lot of reformers to face the formidable threat of Islam in the Hindu heartland. Islam was gaining recognition not only politically but also on the religious front, supported as it was, with state policies that encouraged large scale conversions among the lower caste Hindus, hounded by the pall of the *jaziya* tax.

It is believed that Ramananda did for north India exactly what Nammalvar and his poems did for the south India. He shed the use of Sanskrit in favour of the vernacular, made

the Hindu God accessible to the common man, by bringing Him out of the Brahmin dominated temple and installing him in the heart of all humanity. Towards the practical implementation of the above, he initiated the regular practice of *satsang* (i.e. community singing — a parallel example in Christianity would be the choir practice), of *nam japana* (i.e. meditation) and of the common kitchen where all sat for meals together. The last practice was the most radical, for it was a practice in erasing caste distinctions . Later it was implemented with as much diligence by Nanak in early fifteenth century, after he settled down in Kartarpur on the banks of the Ravi. Of Ramananda's verse there is very little that we know today, except for a single verse attributed to him in the ***Adi Granth*** :

O wither should I go.
There is bliss in my very home.

My mind has stilled.
It has become,
a cripple.

One day in my mind, welled up a desire.
I ground sandal paste and took
distilled aloe wood, many perfumes.

To the Lord's temple I hurried for worship.
But that temple, the Guru revealed,
was within. (Tr. Myself 3941)

The above verse echoes the poem of Basavanna, the *Lingayat* poet of tenth century Karnataka, who describes the body as a moving temple. I have quoted the poem in the section on Shaivites in chapter one.

As can be expected, the orthodox Brahmins excommunicated Ramananda from the elite school of Vaishnavism. But his memory lingered in the modest mud huts of the Gangetic plains. Whether Kabir was a part of Ramananda's physical time, or just belonged to his spiritual time – as a disciple distanced in spatial time, we cannot say for sure. While Virendra Snatak writing in the ***Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature***,

represents the former opinion that, "Kabir was known to be a disciple of Ramananda," on the other hand, in some other sources, there is a clear mention of Kabir's name amongst the twelve leading disciples of Ramananda, which evidently establishes that he was a contemporary of Ramananda. On the other hand, William Dwyer is of the opinion that they were not contemporaries:

Kabir was most probably not a disciple of Ramanand, but if, as is likely enough, Ramanand had a deep influence on bhakti practice in the century preceding Kabir's time, then some indirect influence of his thought on Kabir could legitimately be sought. In traditional Ramanand Bhakti, the singing of sacred songs holds a place of importance. With a variety of musical styles, these songs, ... are chiefly repetitive, perhaps antiphonal, eulogies of God. Kabir tells his listeners: 'You must, with constant joy, sing of his glories'. (*Bhakti In Kabir* 217)

It appears reasonable to see this singing as a community practice, probably as part of the *satsang*. The songs mentioned are joyful and simple, of which we probably have fair samples in present day bhajan and kirtana singing popularized by singers like Pandit Jasraj, Anup Jalota, Jagjit Singh and Anuradha Paudwal, to name a few. It is difficult to agree with Dr. Ramkhalavan Pandey when he asserts that it was characteristic of the bhajans of the *Nirguna* bhakta, to extol the glories of a life of renunciation. This theme is found in Kabir and Nanak's works, but more often than not, it refers to the internal renunciation of attachment. If by renunciation, Dr. Pandey means, renouncing worldly duties and life, then I cannot agree with him. For all the *Nirguna* bhaktas and most of the *Saguna* bhaktas, were householders and worked to make a living. For them renunciation meant extinguishing from the root all emotions of desire, anger, and lust, and acquiring the state of death in life. This was esoterically called, the *Sahaj Marg*. Such concerns are the main subject of poetic compositions of the saint-poets. Nirmal Das's translation of one such verse by Kabir, in *raga Ramkali* illustrates this point.

Meditation leads to salvation's door....

In the house of the fearless One
where music unstruck, resounds,
you shall hear trumpets.

Meditate upon him in your heart

.....

Light a lamp inside you
that does not need any oil.

This lamp will make you immortal;
This lamp will draw out the poison
of lust and anger.

Meditate, meditate, and sing,
'Han, Han' He is limitless
Chants and mantras are useless before Him.
(**Adi Granth** 204-205)

After Ramananda, the Sants (i.e. Namdev, Ravidas, Kabir, Dadu Dayal and Nanak and the Sikh gurus,) opened a new chapter in *Nirguna* or *Sant* Bhakti. Their poetry was highly figurative, sublime in sentiment and scope, reformatory with a vengeance, and alive to the fabric of its times (This, as we shall see in chapter six, was not the case with poetry produced by the colonial stock of Indian intellectuals . Fed upon English education/ literature, and cut off from their own — except for the **Vedas** of which they had a vague idea — they by and large produced poetry in English which was pseudo-romantic and immaculate in its imitative aspect . It failed to move or convince for it was completely cut off from the life breath of Indian reality.)

Kabir rejected the concept of *avatarvada* and denied recognition to Ram as a human form. He carried the concept of religious liberation even further and abandoned both Hinduism and Islam, in favour of the pure essential Ram — that light of divine love in the heart:

..... I abandoned all
the written advice
given me by pundits and mullahs —
took none of it with me.

If love is in your heart

you can behold the Lord
 Those who found Him did so
 by first finding themselves, O Kabir (*Raga Bhairav **Adi Granth** 231*)

Kabir debunked both the Mullah and the Pandit in no uncertain terms

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?
 Yak yak yak, day and night
 You never had an original thought
 Feeling your power, you circumcise –
 I can't go along with that, brother
If your God favoured circumcision,
why didn't you come out cut?
 If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
 what do you call your women?
 Since women are called man's other half,
 you might as well be Hindus.
If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on? /

 Hindu, Muslim = where did they come from?
 Who started this road? (***Bijak** 69-70*)

“
 Hari in the East, Allah in the West –
 So you like to dream.
 Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
 there live Ram and Karim!
 Which is false, Koran or Veda ?
 False is the darkened view.
 Its one, one in everybody!
 How did you make it two?
 Every man and woman born

they're all your forms, says Kabir
 I'm Ram and Allah's foolish baby,
 he's my guru and pir " (*Bijak* 74) [All emphasis mine]

Kabir was always in search of company of his own kind. He went around meeting bhaktas and wise men of both Hindu and Muslim communities, holding dialogue with the Sants and Sufis of his time. Among the Sufis of his age, he had a very close contact with Shaikh Takki who belonged to the Suhrawardi branch of the Sufis. Whether Takki was his Pir or his rival is not clear, history is confused over the issue. Kabir is also said to have met young Nanak. It is said "On seeing him Kabir remarked that he had no misgivings about the future for he was seeing an able man before his leaving the world." (Kshitimohan Sen 102) Sure enough, Nanak who shared the same ideology with Kabir, continued the task of cleansing the socio-religious corruption of his times.

According to the *sakhis* (myths) --- mostly fantastic stories about the poet, circulating among the Kabir-Panthis --- if on one hand Kabir attracted both Hindus and Muslims following, on the other hand he also attracted the ire and venom of both the mullahs and the pundits, according to whom his followers remained neither Hindu nor Muslim ! They looked upon him as a mad man , who often blurted words that made acute sense. There is an interesting *sakhi* in the chronicles of the bhaktas, according to which :

Once on a joint petition from the Hindus and Muslims who felt much aggrieved at Kabir's extreme heterodoxy, the emperor Sikander Shah Lodi summoned him to the court. On entering the court, Kabir saw his accusers, the Hindu pundits and the Islamic kazis, gathered in the complainant's box. This amused him immensely. He burst out into laughter and said that except for some slight mistake regarding the address, things had happened alright. This annoyed Sikander Lodi, and he demanded an explanation. 'My object your majesty', replied Kabir, 'was the uniting of the Hindus and the Mussulmans, but nobody would admit the possibility of such a thing. It pleases me today to see that it has become possible. But if it could have occurred under the throne of an earthly sovereign like your Majesty, could not a far wider place for the purpose have been available under the throne of the Lord of this universe? If it is possible through hatred, is it not all the more possible

through love? Is not love more accommodating than hatred?' The Lodi emperor was ashamed that he had believed the charge against Kabir and ordered his release (G H Westcott 9)

The episode is a crisp illustration of the wit and sharp humour of this great saint of medieval India who also happened to be a great poet of high calibre. The power of his poetry charged with his ability to commune with the divine led to the creation of a poetry amazing in its power, depth and sensitivity — a perfect tool to promote the sort of iconoclasm and reform that Kabir strove towards, all his life. In the remaining part of the chapter we shall examine his poetry merely for the sake of poetry. And attempt to give the poet Kabir his due

Kabir the Poet .

Each reading of the poetry of Kabir leaves one amazed and gasping for breath.

'Amazed', by the scope and potency of the poet's wide-ranging ideas, brilliant metaphors and the sublime scope of vision underlying it all. 'Breathless', because of his strong vocative, sharp irony and robust questioning which inadvertently draws the reader into an intense dialogue with the poet and with oneself

Kabir wrote his verse in the simple but vivid poetic forms of the *shabad*, *ramaini* and the *sakhi*. The *sakhi* is composed in the *doha* (couplet) metre. It has just two lines, which usually come to four short lines when translated. The lines always rhyme at the end, sometimes they also rhyme in the middle. The following couplets translated by G.N.Das are an example:

(i)

*Boond pare jo samund me, tahi jane sab koi,
Samund samaye boond me, birla boojhe koye.*

In translation: Drop falling in the ocean-
everyone knows.
Ocean absorbed in the drop –
a rare one knows.

(11)

*Kabira mun nirmal bhaya, jaise ganga neer
to pache pache han phire, kehet kabir kabir*

In translation Says Kabir, my mind has become
as pure as the ganges water
Hari now runs after me,
calling, 'Kabir', 'Kabir'!
(*Mystic Songs Of Kabir* 11-12)

The *ramaini* form is usually written in the meter called *caupai*. Each line has thirty two *matras* and is split into two units of sixteen *matras* each. The two units of each line generally maintain an internal rhyme structure, thus erasing the need for the lines to rhyme with each other. At the end of the lyric in *caupai*, comes a *sakhi* (couplet), creating a marked change in meter. The *ramaini* is usually based upon a musical raga. It is descriptive and quite lengthy in character. An example in transliteration (taken from *A New Look At Kabir*, by Krishna P. Bahadur)

*Jina kalama kali mamha parhaya,
kudarate khoji tinahu nahim paya.
Karma te karma karai karatuli,
veda kiteba bhayi saba riti.
karma to so jo bhava avatana,
karma to so nimaza ko dhanya.
karma te sunnati aura janeu,
hindu turaka na janai bheu*

*pani pauna samjoya ke, raciya yaha utapata
sunnahi surati samaiya, kasom kahie jata. (136)*

When translated the above verse reads like this:

Those who believed that in this kali- age
the Kali ma would bring one near to the divine.

Could not know God themselves,
 though they essayed!
 Self centered, they did only works that bind
 The Vedas and Quran also speak
 of works that lead to repeated births and deaths
 Not by the namaz is the soul revealed
 Can the Hindus sacred thread,
 Or the Turks circumcision,
 by itself know of race or religion?
 Only the man who can diligently search
 Inside his own Self, can attain God-vision

The same soul dwells in beings everywhere,
 How can it ever be affected by caste
 Or by the accursed body formed of water and air?
 For the soul is immortal and the body does not last
 (Tr G N Das)

The third form, the *pada* or *shabad* is metrically the loosest form. Since it is the popular song form it is passed and gets altered from region to region and from singer to singer, even from performance to performance. Like the *ramaini* form it also has a caesura in each line, but the line lengths vary. Also there are many possible rhyme schemes. The most common is, a series of rhymed couplets. An example.

Santo jagata ninda na kijai
kala na khaya kalpa nahi byapai
deha jara nahi chijai
ulati ganga samundra hi sokhai
sasi an surahi grasai
nana graha mari rogiya baithe
jala ma bimba prakasai.

In translation:

Saints, once you wake up, don't doze off.

Time can't eat you , eons can't swallow you,
 age and decay can't waste you
 Turned –around Ganga dries up the ocean,
 swallows the moon and sun
 The sick man rests, having toppled nine houses
 A shadow burns on the water. (*Bijak* 163)

The *shabad* form is so flexible that often for the purpose of singing *kirtana*, a couplet here can be added or a couplet there dropped. Since the form of the *shabad* is not pure, the *sakhi* and *ramaini* pattern are also found mixed in it, depending on the requirements of a musical composition.

Most of the vernacular poets of medieval India were also gifted performers. Kabir composed extensively and sang his own compositions too, for besides being a craftsman and a poet, he was also a good singer. He nevertheless, never transcribed his verse on paper. (It is popularly believed that he never had any formal education in his lifetime). The rhythmic, incantatory element in his verse can also be attributed to the fact that from Ramananda's times onwards, the singing of sacred songs and satsangs had become an indispensable part of Nirguna Bhakti. Kabir's works lived on for many years after him by the word of mouth. This allowed scope for additions and alterations to creep in. It was much later, in the seventeenth century, that efforts to compile the saint poet's work got underway. In Kabir's case there are three collections, put together by different sects in three widely separated regions of North India. The modern states of Punjab in the west (the *Adi Granth*), Rajasthan in the mid-west (the *Kabir Granthavali*), and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar in the east (the *Bijak*).

The *Adi Granth* is the earliest existing record of Kabir's work. There are in all five hundred and forty one poems of Kabir in the *Granth*. They were assimilated for the first time in 1604 A.D. by the fifth Sikh guru, Arjan Dev when he first compiled the *Adi Granth* — an anthology of mystic poetry, and brought together the songs of the previous Sikh gurus and other Sant and Sufi poets who shared the same vision. The Rajasthani collection, *Kabir Granthavali* is part of the larger collection – *Pancvani* (words of the five), which includes sayings of five saints exalted by the Dadu Panth of Dadu Dayal (Kabir's illustrious disciple). The *Bijak* , which is the scripture of the Kabir

Panth only contains works attributed to Kabir. The dates of origin of the *Pancvani* and the *Bijak* are uncertain but both can be assumed to have taken shape in the seventeenth century, rather later than the *Adi Granth**(7). As Linda Hess says in her introduction to the translated version of the *Bijak*:

The three collections have much in common, but show somewhat different characters. In all traditions – eastern and western, oral and written – Kabir is known for his toughness and iconoclasm. But in the western based Guru Granth and Pancvani, there also appears a softer, more emotional Kabir who sings of ecstatic insight, who experiences passionate longing for and tormented separation from a beloved, or who offers himself in utter surrender, as a servant or beggar, to a personified divine master. Often the western poet's expressions are coloured by the terms and forms of the Krishna Bhakti movement which was then dominant in those regions.

The *Bijak* presents a more austere and dramatic personality, a poet of sudden flashes and jagged primary colours rather than subtle emotional lines. Above all he is the intense teacher, striving to shake his listeners out of their false security, their careless dishonesty, the naive belief that they actually possess and will continue to possess house, body, mate, and family, or that the mind – which Kabir images as a nervous thief or dog howling at its own reflection – is an accurate reporter of what is going on in the world. This Kabir is passionate too; but his passion is to awaken. His personal drama has receded into the background, and the great truth or supreme being he urges us to understand shows almost no trace of anthropomorphism or personality (*The Bijak Of Kabir* 7)

For my chapter on Kabir and for the purpose of studying his works in translation, I have used two standard texts of his translated works: (a) *The Songs of Kabir From The Adi Granth*. Translation and Introduction by Nirmal Dass. Delhi: Indian Books Centre, 1991. and (b) *The Bijak Of Kabir* Translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986. Even a casual reading of Kabir's poems would enable one to agree with Linda Hess's statement that the poetry volumes compiled in the western region (i.e. the *Adi Granth* and *Pancvani*), have a softer and more emotional note, compared

to the volumes of poems compiled in the seventeenth century east India. The **Bijak** presents a more crisp, austere and aggressive version of Kabir's mystic poetry. Added to it is also the fact that Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh have done a better job of translating Kabir's verse. The following poems dealing with the illusive play of *Maya* make a good comparative reading. While the **Bijak's** maya is painted in brisk, aggressive and erotic undertones, Maya (called 'bride'), in the **Adi Granth** is more decoratively described. The tone is 'gentler' while the erotic element is countered by the underlying tone of morality which is characteristic of almost all the verse of the **Granth**. A comparison:

Now I've understood
 Hari's magic play
 Beating his drum he rolls out the show
 then gathers it in again
 The Great Hari dupes gods, men and sages
 When he brings out **the sorceress Maya**
she baffles everyone in the house,
 truth can't enter a single heart.
The magic is false, the magician true –
 to the wise it's clear
 Kabir says, what you understand
 is what you are. (**Bijak** 68)

O my brother,
 if there is no wealth
 in the house, guests
 must go away hungry.
 the householder
 is not happy;
 he is blamed for everything,
 being without a bride.

Hail the bride,
 for she is most holy,

she has changed the minds
of many sages.

..... This bride
is extremely beautiful'

**her anklets jingle, jingle
as she walks.....**

**The three worlds
are in this bride's grip;**
she loves the eighteen Puranas

and place of pilgrimage.
She has ensnared
Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara,
she has pierced the hearts
of kings and maharajas.

This bride has no limits:
She is in league
with the five Naradas.
When the clay-pots
of these Naradas are shattered,
Kabir says,

I was released by my guru's grace (*Adi Granth* 191-192)

[All emphasis mine.]

Kabir writes in a highly figurative language, which bears the mark of genuine one-to-one mystic experience, of a consciousness of the beyond:

Why run around offering water?
There's a sea in every house.
If anyone is thirsty,
by hook or crook, he'll drink. (*Bijak* 91)

The reference above is to the Hindu practice of offering water to the sun, every morning Kabir counters it with reference to the untapped mystical sea of divinity in the house of the body – in yogic terminology, the nectar of immortality dripping from the inverted lotus in the cranium Kabir urges us, to drink from that sea of nectar All that is required is a thirst to drink that water, he says, the rest is immaterial, for *by hook or crook, he'll drink !* Another favourite mystic symbol for the divine, is that of 'light'. "The endless has no end:/ I am in love with the Supreme Light / I overcame the five senses –/ now I am beyond sin and virtue. (Raga Gauri, **Adi Granth** 111) In yet another *sakhi* (couplet), which is part of a long beautiful composition on the fifteen lunar days, also set in raga Gauri, he says.

10.

The tenth day. bliss is everywhere.

Gone is doubt. Gobind is found:

The matchless, the beautiful Light,

flawless, without malice, without shade or sunshine. (**Adi Granth** 119)

The "light" that Kabir sees in this state is not material light but one which shines within the heart, as he calls it the 'supreme', the 'matchless', 'beautiful', 'flawless light', without shade or sunshine. To be finally absorbed in this light is really an expression of final release from this world. In the last couplet of this composition on the fifteen lunar days, the light and the sea merge, so to say. The sea here is, the sea of light:

The full moon fills the sky,

unfurling all its sixteen parts.

Beginning, middle, end: He is steadfast

Kabir is soaked in the sea of solace. (**Adi Granth** 120)

At a more mature level the mystic experiences a loss of the "separative consciousness" – a stretching out of the soul through an upsurge of sublime love. It is as Sisirkumar Ghose calls it, a "state of pure unitary consciousness". And Kabir's use of the metaphor of light is one such expression of deep inwardness and intimacy with the divine. As Sisirkumar Ghosh says :

The Indian classification of knowledge (jnana), works (karma), and ,
devotion (bhakti) is simple but basic. Each has its own field of operation

and effectiveness, also each tends to be exclusive. At its highest by suppressing the contents of the empirical consciousness, the way of knowledge moves towards an encounter with the nameless All, the One without a second, the Fourth. It is a state of pure unitary consciousness wherein (all) awareness of the world and multiplicity is completely obliterated. Thus at its maturer level, mysticism is not only ascent but an integration (*Mysticism : Views And Reviews* 18)

The integration however is flanked by a semantic or communication problem. This obviously is caused by the logical impossibility of having to describe the experience or reality of one order in terms of another. In the attempt Kabir often takes liberties with language and the result generally lends to his verse, an opaqueness, a depth, and a sense of the beyond, and the transcendent, a sense of the half hidden and half revealed truths, which further allure the inclined reader. The following two poems illustrate the point well:

71.

Rain-bird, to what far place
are you crying?
The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six sites are born
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
Sky and light.
The water from which all bodies spring –
who knows its secret?
Not even Kabir. (*Bijak* 64-65)

73.

From the six spheres

a little house was made
 in which was placed a thing unique
 Breath became its lock and key,
 it didn't take long to make.

Keep your heart awake now,
 O my brother.
 You've already lost your life.
 thieves entered and robbed your house

Five watchmen stood at the door,
 but they could not be trusted
 Be alert and think clearly,
 and take in the light
 that will cleanse you

When the beautiful woman
 saw the nine houses,
 she forgot that thing unique.
 Kabir says, "When the nine houses were robbed,
 that which was forgotten went to dwell in the tenth.

(*Adi Granth* 102)

Although Kabir wrote in the local spoken-language of his times, many-a-times reading his poems one feels like one is moving in the realm of language games, where God (or Kabir) provides riddles and we the readers must unravel them. Such is particularly the case above with poem (a), where Kabir seems to have replaced the metaphoric concept of the transcendental divine presence with the water metaphor. At times water here also becomes the regenerative principle behind all forms of life. The other poem (b), is relatively more direct and allegoric in its symbolism. The "house" Kabir talks of here, is the human body, and the "thing unique" is the divine spirit or sea or light that resides in all. Temptations and wrong actions are the thieves that rob the house, the five watchmen are the five senses which have succumbed to the pleasures painted by the beautiful woman, Maya.

Another feature worth noting is the way Kabir's poems approach their subject. Very often a poem begins with a question (as does poem (a) above), which it either answers or strengthens by piling more questions (as we can see in the following poem). In both cases the effect is to draw the reader into their thought process and provoke in them a deep involvement.

112

This is the big fight, king Ram
 Let anyone settle it who can
 Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
 Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
 Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
 Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
 Kabir turns around, it's hard to see –
 is the holy place bigger, or the devotee? (*Bijak* 78)

In yet another poem he attacks the Muslim devotee and cuts the Qazi to size. At the end of each such poem one suspects the poet is enjoying a sense of relish, that sense of a job well done. One can literally imagine Kabir washing his hands off his victim, after the interrogation or the brain-storming session:

49.

Where's his doorway, dervish?
 How does the great king dress?
 Where does he travel?
 Where does he camp?
 What's this form
 you bow to?
 I'm asking you, Mr. Muslim,
 with your red and yellow
 rags and robes
 Now you Mr. Qazi,
 What kind of work is that,
 going from house to house

chopping heads?
 Who gave the order for chicken and goats?
 Who told you to swing the knife?
 Aren't you afraid to be called a sage
 as you read your verses
 and dupe the world?
 Kabir says, the high-class Muslim
 wants to force his way on the world
 Fast all day,
 kill cows at night,
 here prayers, there blood –
 does this please God?
 (**Bijak** 87-88)

Kabir profusely applies the interrogative in his work. He pokes questions at the reader either to provoke us into thinking, or to chide us, taunt us, and laugh at us and thereby arouse us out of the spiritual lethargy that lesser mortals tend to slip in. When Kabir is not prodding, he is narrating. Narrating what? A story or a scene that he has conceived at that very moment, or the dramatic exchange of dialogue among characters ('clay pots' as he often calls them,) he has pulled in at random and fired with his genius, wit and dramatic. The following two poems successfully illustrate the point. They are also proof of the poet's great genius. The first poem is an example of the poet's brilliant sense of the dramatic. There are four characters in it, the Qazi, the mystic, an elephant, and the mahout. The Qazi has tied the mystic's hands and thrown him in front of the elephant as a punishment. But the dumb beast refuses to harm the mystic, despite the mahout's goading, and much to the Qazi's chagrin. The second poem has a gentle, mesmerising note.

4

They tied my hands
 and tossed me
 like a clump of dirt.
 In their anger
 they hit the elephant

on the head
 The elephant screamed
 and ran away.
 I could sacrifice myself
 for that animal

O my Thakur, You are my strength
 The qazi said, ' Goad that elephant on

hey mahout,
 or else
 I'll have your head
 cut off!
 Make it move!
 Hit it! Hit it!
 The elephant did not move.

It was enraptured:
 In its heart
 lived the Dispenser of Treasure.

'What sin has this saint committed
 that you tie him up
 like a bundle
 and toss him in front of the elephant?
 The elephant again and again
 picked up this bundle
 and bowed in obeisance to it
 Still the blind qazi
 could not figure it out. (**Adi Granth** 187-188)

6
 One tree,

yet countless shoots and branches,
 its leaves are filled with nectar.
 This is the garden of ambrosia,
 O my brother -
 The perfect Hari planted it

Only those few,
 those very few holy ones,
 know the tale of Raja Ram,
 Brother,
 in whose heart gleams
 His light

A bumblebee
 drunk with nectar
 loses himself in the full-blown petals,
 but fanning the air
 he flies away
 to the sky.

From the gentle silence
 a beautiful plant sprouts,
 which soaks up
 the waters of the earth
 Kabir says, I serve those
 who have seen this plant. (**Adi Granth** 201-202)

One is amazed again and again , by the range and scope of Kabir's poetic imagination and sensibility. His facility to travel from the tiniest, most beautiful/fragile of details to the most sublime, and sometimes the goriest, of realities. Commenting on the highly figurative and sufficiently complex network of metaphors in his poems, William Dwyer says: "Metaphors, symbols and other forms of figurative expression are the tools of the trade of poets, seers, and mystics, by which they give utterance to their otherwise seemingly inexpressible experiences " (**Bhakti In Kabir** 43)

Kabir has a remarkable range of metaphoric expressions. His *sakhis* (couplets) in particular are crisp examples of these. The clay-pot, the swan, crow, bee, nectar, the ocean or the sea, light, elephant of the mind, and the phantasmal flower are some metaphors that feature profusely in his poetry. Some samples of the *sakhis* taken from the *Bijak*

91

In the garden the bee lingers,
so many fragrant flowers there.
In the senses the creature lingers,
finally it goes out in despair. (99)

118

A raft of tied-together snakes
in the world ocean.

let go, and you'll drown

Grasp, and they'll bite your arm (103)

69

Drop falling in the ocean -

everyone knows.

Ocean absorbed in the drop -

145.

The mind, a mad killer- elephant

a rare one knows (66)

They can't be stopped by chants or charts.

When they like they swoop and eat (106)

253

The body's a ship, the mind's a crow
that flies a million miles.

Sometimes it roams on the boundless sea,

Sometimes it shoots to the sky (119)

In the *sakhis* quoted above one notices the fluid interchange of meanings that a symbol undergoes in different contexts (poems). "This also indicates a certain amount of disregard for some types of technical terminology in favour of more stress on intuition and experience. This is typical of all mystics more involved with interiorisation and

sublimation of spiritual faculties " (K P Bahadur 151-153.) Take the ocean metaphor for instance, in *sakhi* 69, 'ocean' symbolises the divine and the drop that merges with it, the individual soul. In *sakhi* 118, the ocean metaphor is indicative of the world ocean, which the individual is trying to cross ironically with the help of a raft made from 'tied-together snakes'. Another such feature one can pick from this handful of *sakhis* is the metaphors used for the mind and *maya* (the temptress figure in Hindu mythology). In *sakhi* 145, the mind is a 'mad killer-elephant' while in *sakhi* 253 it is symbolised as 'a wandering crow'. The symbolism of *maya* is not as straight-forward. In one context it is the 'garden of senses', to which the man/bee succumbs, in another it is 'desires like hawks', and yet elsewhere it is treacherous as 'entwined snakes' that appear to be the helpful 'raft' which will ferry men across the world ocean.

One of the striking features of Kabir's poetry is its particularly lavish use of animal imagery, and metaphor, which is more in evidence in his *ulatbansi* poems (poems that use upside-down language to communicate an altogether different world-order) But before we go into that I would like to discuss briefly, that aspect of Kabir's prosody which not only distinguishes him from the other Bhakti poets but also lends him a shade of notonety. Kabir was an aggressive poet, shockingly honest and iconoclastic to the hilt. Even the occasion of his own death was used to prove a point. According to popular belief, by dying in Varanasi (Benaras) one went straight to heaven, while whosoever died in Maghar was sure to be reborn as a donkey. Kabir's response was typical. Towards the end of his life, he shifted from Varanasi (where he had lived all his life), and settled in Magahar, which was forty miles away.

The following poem, sparkles not only with the poet's ready wit and wicked sense of humour, it also bespeaks of the passion and integrity of the great poet and mystic:

Shabad 103

.....That Maithili pandit said
you'd die near Magahar
What a terrible place to be dead!

If you want Ram to take you away,

die somewhere else instead
 Besides, they say
 whoever dies at Magahar
 comes back a donkey

So much for your faith in Ram
 What's Kashi? Magahar? Barren ground,
 when Ram rules in your heart
 If you give up the ghost in Kashi
 is there some debt
 on the Lord's part? (*Bijak* 76)

What is it in Kabir's poems that gives them such a sense of immediacy and that sense of being an empowered dialogue ? *(6). One, is his sharp and at times intimate vocative, when he directly addresses the subject of his poem, questions him or insults him, thus immediately shocking the reader, arousing his/her interest and drawing him/her into the argument. That does the trick! "Hey , Son of a slut! / There I've insulted you." ; " Read, read Pandit, make yourself clever." , "Culprit you have missed your human birth." ; "Think , pundit, figure it out: / male or female?"; and much more of such provoking vocative. The second factor, which more or less is a continuation of the first, is his keen sense of drama which induces him to create fabulous characters at the spur of the moment, put words into their mouth and plunge into a dialogue with them , all the time switching between direct and indirect speech, interrogation and metonymy, laced with his brand of irony and reformatory zeal. An example.

3

Your time for deeds is over
 now you must give account.
 Yama's cruel messengers
 have come to take you away
 'What did you earn?
 How did you squander it?
 Come quickly ,
 the master calls.'

'Come at once, the Master calls
The summons from Hari's court has come.'

You will grovel:
'But I have things still to do
in the village. Let me settle them
by this evening. I will pay
for all your expenses,
and we can say
our dawn prayers
on the road.

.....
Those who sleep while awake
are not reborn
The wealth and fortune
you amassed
is not really yours.
Kabir says, those who forget
the master lie neglected
in the dust. (**Adi Granth** 170-171)

The last contributing factor in the setup is the poet himself, with the more evolved vision and abilities of a mystic. Sisirkumar Ghosh very rightly says that.

Instead of accusing the mystics of being dropouts and escapists, it might be fairer to say that . . . In the alchemy of awareness they have been the true scientists of catharsis and conversion, the piercing of the planes which is another name for the ascent of man. The only radical thinkers, they alone got to the root of the matter, beyond the various shaky schemes of mundane perfection, swaying between the worship of the Fatted Calf and the horror of Organisation Man.(**Mysticism: Views and Reviews** 15)

It is this uncanny ability of the mystic poet to utter sublime truths, speckled with flashes of insight, and to create great transcendental poetry that makes for a very sound basis in his thesis

Having surveyed the various aspects of Kabir's poetry, we shall now look at his *ulatbamsi* (upside-down) poems. They are better read as the framework of an ongoing ancient tradition of *tantric* verse-writing. The *tantric* writings originally draw there sublime conceptions from the Upanishads and are associated with Hatha yoga and early *tantric* Buddhism, which finally shaped them. As Linda Hess writes:

Expressions similar to Kabir's upside-down language predate him by three thousand years in Indian religious literature. But it was in the millenium before Kabir that this sort of language became associated with the main movement in Indian religion, generally spoken of under the heading of tantrism. Cryptic and paradoxical expressions abound in the Hindu and Buddhist tantras, the texts of hatha yoga, the vernacular poetry of the Buddhist 'siddhas' who lived between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Study of Kabir's *ulatbamsi* poems can shed light on the whole *sadhabhasa* (intentional or hidden language) tradition of medieval India.
(*Bijak* 136)

There was a time (roughly 700 to 1200 A.D.), when Indian religion was dominated by tantrism. Teachings were dense, crowded with rituals, diagrams, sounds and (yogic) postures, and language was concrete. There was a general thrust upon the concept of non-duality, a pulling together of opposites, and a prevailing opinion that the individual mind and body were aiding agents on the path to enlightenment. Thus the body as a vehicle, an instrument. Around this time around the tenth century, we have the development of Hatha yoga – a minutely detailed literal and symbolic anatomy of the body, and a technique for attaining liberation through physical postures and breathing exercises often combined with meditation and austerities.

Hatha yoga propagates the theory that through physical exercises, the normal tendency of the body's energy to flow downward and be depleted can be reversed, and the coiled serpent-power (*kundalini*) at the base of the spine can be drawn upwards until it strikes the "thousand-petaled lotus" in the cranium and all distinctions disappear in a burst of

light The *tantric* yogic text of concreteness, reversals, and apparent obscurity derived from such yogic science is the immediate source of the upside-down language we find so frequently in the works of Kabir. The body is thus not just flesh, blood and bones, but an entire cosmos – a microcosm complete with flowers, light, breeze, sound, serpent, swan, hawks, music, the skies, mountain sea and the seventy two thousand passageways (‘*nadis*’ to which I have referred earlier in this chapter). In light of the above, terms like semen, moon-drops, liquor, nectar, sky, lotus/flower and other such symbols in Kabir’s poems can either be literal or symbolic or both.

101

I looked and looked – astonishing!
 (only a rare one hears me sing)
 The earth shot backwards to the sky,
 an elephant fell into an ant’s eye,
 mountains flew without a breeze,
 souls and creatures climbed the trees,
 in a dry lake the waves lashed,
 without water, water-birds splashed.
 Pandits sat and read the law,
 babbled for what they never saw.
 Who understands Kabir’s rhyme
 is a true saint to the end of time. (*Bijak* 75)

It’s a confounding world where all sane orders are reversed. Kabir’s poems intrigue because to the reader who is not a Nath yogi they are absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful. Such verse (referred to as *ulatbamsi* – literally meaning, “upside-down”,) generally strikes one dumb with amazement or makes one laugh, or worst, leaves one feeling like a fool : “...*One frog ate five snakes./ Kabir shouts: / both together one!*”

There are many types of expressions associated with the term *ulatbamsi*, such as: (a) the obvious paradoxes and upside-down situations as in a “cow drinking milk from the calf”, the “rain falling from the earth to the sky”. Situations that reverse apparent patterns; (b) poems full of animal characters placed in upside-down situations (eg. “a snake guards a frog”, while “fish hunt in the forest,”) or mainly humorous situations

where “the fly shaves his head” and “the heron gnashes his teeth”; (c) tangled domestic relationships with incestuous sons and mothers conspiring with in-laws, (d) Images related to the anatomical system of Hatha yoga. For instance the sun, moon, and the thousand-petaled lotus symbolised as the sky And lastly, (e) the use of mystic numbers. An instance is “the cow that drinks through nine tubes, is locked in seventy two rooms, and eats from four trees with six branches and eighteen leaves”.

Based within such an ancient and rich tradition of verse writing and added to it Kabir's own mystic genius, both as poet and as an ascetic, his *ulatbansi* poems are highly figurative, resonant with sounds and allusions and inter-textual exchange at various levels of all sorts. They read like an orchestra and often have a fable like quality about them. What with Kabir constantly fetching comparisons from the animal world, as he unmask the layers of masks men live in. Let us read the following composition, where Kabir attacks hypocrisy, crookedness and false vanity.

104

How will you cross, Nath

how will you cross,

so full of crookedness?

Look how he meditates
serves and prays.

Look: the white plumage,
the cranes sly ways.

Mood of a snake, look!

utterly lewd,

utterly quarrelsome

utterly shrewd.

Look! a hawk's
face, and the thoughts
of a cat.

Schools of philosophy
like a cloak furled.

Look! the witch vanity

gulps down the world. (*Bijak* 76)

While symbolism in the poem above is not so difficult to interpret; perfect clarity in decoding the meaning of most *ulatbamsi* poems is near impossible. For a symbol can be polyphonic in its connotations, it need not be necessarily singular and simplistic in its implication. In fact as the Indian *dhvani* theorists like Anandavardhana insist, a mystic poet's language is different from ordinary language. "It conveys more than what it says". "Polyvalence" is the way meaning works in these poems. Another requirement of the *Rasa-dhvani* theory of Indian poetics is that the poets can communicate adequately, provided the readers are also *sahridaya* (sensitive), and poetically inclined. It would be best to leave Kabir's poems at that, rather than attempt at pinning them down simplistically. The best way to read his poems would be a one-to-one approach. Any expert, single interpretation would only diminish their dialogue which can only begin and begin again.

To sum up. The above chapter begins with the fact and fiction surrounding the birth of Kabir the mystic. (a) It traces the saga of the Islamic advent upon the Indian sub-continent. And (b) it traces the simultaneous fanning out of the Bhakti movement as it evolved gradually. Both (a) and (b) provide significant context to Kabir's poetic text. Another system which has been discussed in some detail is the semiotics of Nath terminology, which performs a major role in Kabir's poetry, in particular in his *ulatbamsi* verse.

Besides analysing Kabir's highly figurative and dramatic style of verse writing, an attempt is also made to cull from the poems, his ideology in relation to concepts like "God as manifest and non manifest", "worship as an external and internal practice", the idea of liberation, maya (illusion), nature, yoga, religion, woman, and so on. In short, an attempt is made to "locate" and to "weigh", Kabir the poet and social reformist, in the continuing tradition of Indian poetry which is predominantly characterized as being mystical, incantatory and highly figurative.

Notes

- (1) The ***Kabir Kasauti*** was published in 1985, Bombay. Written in Hindi it is the joint production of five members of the Kabir Panth and is based upon information gleaned both from books and the oral tradition.
- (2) There is an uncertainty about the dates of Ramananda's birth and death as well. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Muslim rule was well established in North India, during his time. His teachings on religion and related social problems provide the first available evidence of the impact of Islam on Hinduism in the heartland of the country. ***Guru Nanak To Guru Gobind*** 15.
- (3) There are two opinions on this. According to McLeod in ***Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion*** the two sants never met, that the influence of Kabir on Nanak was indirect, gleaned through the Sant channels. The Bhakti movement in its later stage, wherefrom it drops idol worship and becomes deeply mystical and internal, is referred to as the Sant Tradition. Scholarship identifies Namdev as the first Sant.
- (4) Namdev's influence extended into northern India as a result of his Hindi works and possibly also as the result of an extended visit to the Punjab. Doubts have been expressed aplenty regarding whether it was Namdev. According to this tradition, Namdev spent twenty years in Ghuman, a village in Batala tehsil of Gurdaspur district. In Ghuman itself, the tradition is both strong and old, and there is nothing impossible in a Sant wandering so far from home. (154). W.H. McLeod, ***Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion***. Delhi: OUP, 1968.
- (5) The Nath sect was founded by the semi-legendary yogi Matsyendranath who lived in the tenth century. The tenets of Nath yoga are rooted in the Samkhya system of philosophy codified by Patanjali as Yogadarsanam. It is an ascetical theory which furnishes for yoga, the categories for metaphysical and psychological analysis. Another major fabric woven into Nath asceticism is from Tantric Buddhism which contains a variety of elements like (i) the power of mantra (mystic syllables) whose repetition can lead on to mystical states (ii) belief in the qasi-magical power

attributed to *mudras* (postures of body and limbs) and (iii) their capacity to awaken the latent potencies in man's psycho-somatic complex

- (6) A few sakhis of Kabir's verse on knowledge from the *Bijak*, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh:

All these people
very proud of their own heads,
very far, from Han –
They'll never stumble on knowledge. (109)

188

Knowledge in front, knowledge in back,
knowledge right and left
The knowledge beyond knowledge
is my knowledge (112)

- (7) The *Kabir Granthavali*, was first published in 1930 A.D., by Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Varanasi. According to the *Encyclopaedia Of Indian Literature*, brought out by the Sahitya Akademi, the text of the work is "based upon the manuscript which was compiled in 1504 A.D., fourteen years before the death of Kabirdas. It is supposed to have been penned by some Malookdas, but it is not certain whether, he was the same famous disciple of Kabir..". "That which Kabir preached in the last fourteen years of his life was compiled in the *Granth Sahib* by and large, in the year 1604 A.D. Before the publication of the *Granthavali*, *Bijak* or *Kabir Bijak* was regarded as the most authentic account of the poet's teachings." (Vol III 1904)

- (8) Refer to "*Mysticism and Ineffability : Some Issues of Logic and Language*," *The Word And The World*, by B K Matilal. The book brilliantly surveys the various schools of Indian poetics.

*

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CHAPTER FIVE

Nanak : The Coming-of-Age of Nirguna Bhakti

Trudging headlong through the continent
Man contemplates *Rabba** standing on one foot.

Controlling his wind-like mercurial mind,
remembering Him, he bows –
Bending his head extremely low

On whom does he lean ?
Whom does he want to force?

How can it be said, Nanak?
Whom the Creator will bless with his bounties?

Swami keeps all under His command
Only the fool exposes himself. (Tr Myself *Granth Sahib* 4091-4092)

*(*Rabba* being Persian word for God , the posture of standing on one foot alludes to the icon of Shiva or a yogi.)

The above group of shlokas (translated by myself), are set to raga *Saranga*. They parody and comment upon the spiritual blindness that inflicts many a superficial, idol-worshipping devotee for whom bowing his head steeply is sufficient proof of his devotion to the *Rabba* or *Swami* of the universe. To come to Nanak after reading Kabir is the most logical progression. Ideologically the two share a lot in common and yet are poles apart as personalities

In this chapter I begin with an assessment of the work of Nanak the poet and social-activist. Then comes a sketch on his biography Since Nanak has always been predominantly seen as a Sikh guru and since the fact of his being the last major Sant-

poet has largely been underplayed, the chapter attempts to answer a few questions like. Why has the poet's work not received enough academic (not theological) attention so far? How was he, as a Sant and a Sikh, placed at a significant turning point in history? What was his contribution? The chapter also makes an attempt to examine the poet's work (which suffers from the lack of skilled translation), and attempts to trace in his work the subtle shades of influence.

Nanak was the last to come in the line of the *Nirguna* Bhakti poets the "Sants" as they were called popularly. Incidentally, he also became the founding saint of another religious tradition, Sikhism. The later fact has been emphasised too often, and sometimes (I think), been blown out of proportion by scholarship on Nanak. Their treatment of the poet too is coloured by their faith and reverence. It is exaggerated in its laudation, and fails to maintain a healthy objective distance or to furnish a critical analysis with adequate scholarly detail and illustration from the poet's works. The normal pattern of existing scholarship on Nanak is, to discuss certain major compositions of the poet and ignore the treasure-trove of his less-known, shorter poems; composed to musical measures – ragas – and lying buried in the fourteen hundred and odd pages of the *Adi Granth*, (or the *Granth Sahib*, as it is more often referred to). They come alive on religious occasions or in the *kirtan* sung by the Ragis /priests, in the *gurudwaras* (Sikh temples).

The reverence surrounding the Sant has done more harm to the poet Nanak, than good. For when a people claim fetish possession upon a thing or a person, and build walls of love/possession around it, the unspoken message they convey to others is, 'keep off'. It could then be, a wife, a piece of land or a free-spirited saint that has been appropriated and fenced within the walls of conservative devotion. The underlying cycle of ownership – territory (demarcation) –and fencing (indicating possession of property,) is the same in each case.

Nanak has been read more for his religious philosophy and for his role in the history of Sikhism, than for his poetry alone. Works of dispassionate scholarship too are few and scattered in between. There does not exist in the book bazaar, a single anthology of Nanak's poetry in translation. Translated anthologies of poets of the Medieval period, like Kabir, Farid, Mira, Tukaram, Jayadev and others can easily be found. But for Nanak

one has only the bulky **Adi Granth** to trudge through. The poet Sant has come to be perceived only as part of a tradition comprising ten successive gurus, (six of whom wrote poetry. Their verse along with that of other Bhakti poets and Sufis, is compiled in the **Granth Sahib**. To examine them as well would be to deviate from the subject-matter of our thesis). In the ensuing pages I shall endeavour to show that Nanak was a poet of considerable calibre. A poet who was the logical product of his environment which was the Bhakti movement of medieval India. He ought to be read for his own sake, along with Basavanna (the eleventh century *Lingayat* poet), Namdev, Ravidas, Kabir, Narasimha, Tagore, Aurobindo and many others. All of them, great men, path makers, and poets of the same soil.

For the purpose of illustrating Nanak's verse, I have referred mainly to the basic translations that are available in the text of the **Granth Sahib** translated into Punjabi and English by the late Manmohan Singh of Amritsar. They have been translated from the original medieval Punjabi and *Sadhbhasa*. They lack the sophistication of an A.K Ramanujan or a Dilip Chitre's work ⁽¹⁾, but are good enough to introduce the reader to the spirit of the poet Nanak. To undertake to translate them all (nine hundred and forty seven in number), by myself would have been quite tedious at the moment, though I have translated a few. The couple of following *dohas* in both translation and transliteration will give the reader a feel of his work in the original as well as in translation:

Pain is arsenic and Hari's name an antidote.
Pound it in the mortar of contentment
with the pestle of your hands gift.

Dukh mahuah maran Hari nam
Sila santokh pisuno hath dan

Ever, ever take . this medicine so your body
does not pine away.
Otherwise death will pommel you at the final hour.

Nit nit lehu na khije deh(a)
Ant(a) kal jum mare theh(a). (Tr. Manmohan Singh **Granth Sahib** 41-45)

Nanak has to his credit, a number of long poems, namely , “**Japji**”, “**Siddha Goshti**” and “**Dakhni Omkar**”, besides over nine hundred shorter poems (better called hymns, for they were meant to be sung), which are set to about thirty ragas of the Hindustani Classical Music's tradition (The names of the ragas have been listed in the end notes:*2). The “**Japji**” is regarded as the most important composition in Sikh literature. It is a description of “the Sadhana or effort that man has to make in order to realise the Divine”. The “**Siddha Goshti**” is a polemic against the ascetic and esoteric practices of the Siddhas , followers of the legendary Gorakh Nath. And the third long poem ‘**Dakhni Omkar**’, involves in a similar debate with the Brahmins. Among his other longer poems are the *Vars* (clusters of verses) written in raga *Majh*, raga *Asa* and raga *Malhar*. The poem ‘Asa-Di-Var’ enjoys a prime status in the Sikh system of worship. A *Var* in Punjabi folklore is a verse narrative of love and war. The *Vars* in the *Granth* however, are philosophical and lyrical in nature. Their core stanzas have “distinctly metaphysical meaning”, but at places they also adopt an aggressive and revolutionary tone.

Nanak's shorter poems (and those of his successor poet gurus), have been arranged in the *Granth* under three categories. Poems composed (and sung) in a particular raga are grouped together, so that all poems composed in one raga can be found in that particular section of raga *Malhar* or raga *Basant*, or raga *Bhairav* etc. In which raga a particular verse would be cast was determined by factors like the mood and subject of the poem, the time of the day when it should ideally be sung, and also the set of metaphors or seasons the poem was referring to. For instance, raga *Basant* would be for spring time associations, while raga *Malhar* would be for the monsoons (or night time), with its play on the cloud-thunder-lightening-darkness metaphors and the sentiment of joy and longing . As Bhai Avtar Singh Ragi says, in an interview to a journalist of the *Times Of India*: “It is natural to identify these poems by the author, what is unusual is that these poems were strung together and identified by the ... raga in which the hymns were first sung and possibly also composed.” (Bhai Avtar Singh Ragi has been singing the hymns of the Gurus all his life. He belongs to a family associated with the third Guru, and has a treasure-trove of kirtans preserved since the medieval times under the rubric of *gurnat sangeet*.)

The second category employed in the arrangement of poetry in the **Granth** is that of poetic form and metrical structure according to which verse is segregated. There was, among the prevailing poetic meters and folk forms, a good degree of flexibility, owing to the fact that very little was written down and in the course of its oral transmission from one place to another it was liable to variation. Medieval Bhakti poetry is therefore not very strict in meter. Most of Nanak's compositions use the two-line *sakhi* or *shloka* form. The lines always rhyme at the end and sometimes in the middle as well. The most popularly used meter is the *chaupai*, in which each line has thirty-two *matras* and is divided in the middle by a caesura, with sixteen *matras* on either side. The compositions are often classed as *ashta padis* or *chaupadis*. *Ashta* means eight and *chau* means four, therefore a composition having eight *padas* is an *ashta padi* and that having four *padas* becomes a *chaupadi*. The *pada* or *shabad* being metrically the loosest form. It was the most popular song form, that kept altering as it travelled from region to region and from one performance to another. It generally used the rhyming couplet. As S.S. Sekhon says in the *Encyclopaedia Of Indian Literature*.

These compositions have a very definite metrical structure, but so many variations are rung upon the regular metres that superficial observers often miss the pattern. The expression is classical, chaste and well-thought-out, and yet an impression of spontaneity is given. (Vol. III 2871)

The third category of arranging poetry in the **Adi Granth** was under established folk forms like *Prabhatis* (hymns sung in the morning), *Allahnian* which are closer to the English elegy, the *Kirtan Sohila* which eulogised the divine and his beautiful creation (mostly nature poetry), and the *Ghorian* which are usually sung during a wedding or celebration of some kind. Other such forms used in the **Granth** include, the *Sodar* (meaning, your doorstep), *Wanjare* (meaning, gypsy or vagabonds.), *Pahare* and *Birharasa*. As I mentioned earlier, there is very scanty amount of scholarship on the poetics, style, and format of Nanak's poetry which one finds spread under the above mentioned categories through the entire **Adi Granth**.

Broadly, Nanak's work is perceived as (a) several short poems and five long compositions. These are further perceived as (b) poems written in his younger days and those that were composed during his older and maturer days. The verse attributed to the younger Nanak, is rich, has an aura of splendour about it and is profuse in the emotions

it portrays upon the canvas of the changing moods of nature. It is also more aggressive. The following composition from "**Asa-di-Var**" is a sample:

The disciples play the music
and the preceptors dance
They move their feet
and roll their heads.
Dust flies -- flies and settles
upon their locks.
Beholding them,
people laugh, and leave.
For the sake of bread,
they beat time
They dash themselves
against the ground
Sing Gopis, and sing Krishans,
Sing Sitas, sing Ramas and Kings.
Fearless is the Formless Lord

The oil press, the spinning wheel,
and the quern potters wheel;
the many endless deserts;
whirl winds and tops; the churning
staves, the threshers, and the breathless tumblings
of birds –
mounted upon a stake, all are whirled.

He alone swings
around mortals,
bound in entanglement.
Each must dance in accord with their deed.
. Dancing and leaping
are the mind's yearnings.
Nanak they who fear Him, also love Him. (**Granth Sahib** 1534)

A subtle sense of euphemism and irony runs through the vibrant dance music and whirling movements of the poem. Here it is the circular spinning movement that is troped upon, to ultimately convey the larger meaninglessness of all movement. "Dancing and leaping are the mind's yearnings / Nanak they who fear Him also love Him." It is characteristic of Nanak, to voice in the last few couplets of every poem, his ideology on the formless One. Here we have his theory that fear and love are two sides of the coin of Bhakti. The element of "fear of God" seems to be an Islamic influence. None of the bhaktas, not even Kabir before him, have ever referred to it. The above poem also gives us a glimpse of the Medieval rural Punjab, the countryside, "its whirl winds and spinning tops" (the children play with), "the dancing mendicants" (a reference to the yogis), and "the tumbling birds", with the mythological deities turned into common names by Nanak who pluralises them as Krishnas, Sitas, Ramas and Kings.

Nanak's maturer poetry is marked by condensed thought and architectural perfection. Of his longer poems, the "**Japji**", the "**Dakhni Omkar**", and "**Siddha Goshti**", are supposed to have been written by the older Nanak, presumably at Kartarpur, where he settled down to a farmers life, at the age of fifty.

The "**Japji**". *Jap* means to recite, and therefore the "**Japji**" - The Recitation. It is Nanak's most known and most translated work of poetry. It is also his most somber and theological composition. It is placed at the beginning of the **Granth Saheb**. The composition consists of thirty-eight principal stanzas (*pauries* as they are called), and an additional preliminary one. It can roughly be divided into four parts: (a) the first seven *pauries*, beginning with an invocation. They define Nanak's concept of God and put into relief the seeker's confusion regarding how to achieve divinity. (b) The next twenty stanzas take the seeker step by step on the way till he arrives at the vision of the great divine reality. (c) The third part consists of four stanzas describing the attitudes and outlook of one who has tasted the divine, and (d) the last portion, again seven *pauris*, is in the nature of a summary which describes more clearly, than the second part of "**Japji**", the stages on the seeker's path.

"**Dhakni Omkar**", is a longish poem in Raga *Ramkali*, with an incantatory rhythm and short lines that rhyme at the end. The language is figurative, rich in imagery, and has an

almost tartan sense of splendour Nanak here is preoccupied with singing paeans to the divine light, the supra soul who works "through wind, water, fire and various shapes / The One soul (that) wanders through the three worlds." The poet's theological concerns and his concept of the divine find expression again and again, as he weaves yet newer texts of symbols and the imagined, to describe the kingdom of the formless being. His canvas is infinity beyond the bounds of time age and place. The poet speaks in terms of four ages, three worlds etc. and creates an unnatural world strewn with the gems and pearls and sapphire of God's name and grace. A land where the swans abound, extraordinary swans which can separate milk from water, and so on. He speaks sometimes of the path of spirituality and the seeker in general terms. The poetic style resembles that of the *Rig Veda* and the *Upanishads*. It is incantatory and shares the same sense of continuous calm:

The mercurial mind remains not still
 The mind-deer secretly eats the green shoots of sin.
 He who enshrines the Lord's lotus feet
 in his heart lives eternally. (*Granth Sahib* 3044)

Sometimes Nanak speaks of his own personal progress through the poetic labyrinth:

My shyness and hesitation has died and perished;
 Now I walk unveiling my face. (*GS* 3039)

I surrender my mind unto the Lord
 and lay before him my body and soul (*GS* 3057)

The treasure of the myriad
 of pearls, jewels, and emeralds
 is in the True Guru's hand. (*GS* 3059)

Having consolidated the need to abstain from over indulgence of worldly comforts and attachments, Nanak closes the poem with an emphasis upon the importance of meditating and remaining in constant remembrance of the divine.

. Nanak,

He alone is learned, he the wise scholar
who wears the necklace of Ram's Name (GS 3065)

Of the three longer poems of Nanak , presumably composed later in his life, “**Dakhni Omkar**” is the most splendid and imaginative in its array of images, colourful detail and landscapic grandeur as the poet paints God’s kingdom from the buzz of a bumble bee around a lotus in muddy waters, to the sun, moon , the stars and wind and other surreal realms – images that soften the severity of the theme His treatment of creation echoes the approach of the ***Upanishads***. The following lines illustrate this:

He works through wind, water, fire and various shapes
The One soul wanders through the three worlds. (**GS** 3036)

Descending low the ambrosial rain
 is incessantly falling
The sublime shabad, embellishes the mortal (GS 3037)

The “**Japji**” and the “**Siddha Goshti**” on the other hand, are more somber, (especially the “**Japji**”), and unembellished. Their prime concern is the theological theme. While the “**Japji**” unfolds the fundamentals of Sikh metaphysics, and delineates ways and means for the individual human soul to seek reunion with the Universal Soul; the “**Siddha Goshti**” spells out further details of some of Nanak’s philosophy. It argues effectively the futility of the practices of the *Karma-kandis*, particularly the yogis who lay much store by Hatha-yoga. It advocates the path of *Sahaj yoga*, based on *nam simran*, the ultimate object of which is the creation of the ideal man. Except for the “**Japji**” where Nanak’s thoughts and insights are well-structured, with an almost architectural precision; all other verse of his uses meter and rhyme and is set in some musical measure (*raga*).

The "**Siddha Goshti**", set to the raga *Ramkali*, is a treatise in the question-answer form of dialogue with other yogis. The setting is a country fair at Batala in Punjab, and the characters are, the poet Nanak and a group of ascetics fond of displaying miracles and flaunting their magical powers. Yogis in Nanak's days had strayed from the path of genuine spirituality. They derived pleasure from bullying and lived off the common people. They get more than their share of criticism in Nanak's works, the obvious reason

being the strong hold they had upon people and their misuse of it in the medieval Punjab. At the commencement of the treatise, they try to bully and subdue Nanak with their awful miracles. On failing to do which they initiate a debate, questioning Nanak's faith vis-à-vis their own. The replies that Nanak makes to the yogis in their own idiom, (which use terms like "tenth door", "mystic harmony," and the sun and moon as they occur in yogic parlance), sum up very accurately the Sant-poet's philosophy and spiritual stature.

By remaining as the lotus untouched by water,
and the duck on the stream,
By concentrated fixing of the mind in the holy word,
Says Nanak, is crossed the ocean of existence. (GS 3067)

"**Asa-di-Var**" consists of fifty seven compositions comprising of *shlokas* and *pauris*. Forty one poems of these are Nanak's compositions, and sixteen shorter pieces (most of which come towards the end), are by the second guru, Angad Dev. Essentially sung in the morning, the "**Asa-di-Var**" begins with hymns in the praise of *Rabba* (God). Later the mood changes as Nanak's roving eye picks upon the wrong doings of men towards men. The verse is iconoclastic, bold, aggressive, and laced with sarcasm and irony towards the ideological aberrations in society : "There is a famine of truth, / falsehood prevails, and the blackness / of the Dark age has made men demons." (GS 1546) The *Pandits* are *butchers*, they waylay people with the trap of ritual:

While mentally blind, the Pandit is named surjan.
The man-eaters say the prayer.
They who wield the Scalpel
wear the thread around their neck. (GS 1556)

There is no thread for the sexual organ
and no thread there is for the woman...
No thread for the feet, no thread for the hands,
the tongue, the eye! (GS 1555)

Nanak makes a parody of the whole ritual. The superficial reading and ritualising, of the Vedas is also criticised

With your mouth you utter falsehood
 like the precious ornaments,
 And recite the three line Gaoatr
 three times a day (1553 GS)

The term *Gaoatr* above, refers to the *Gayatr Mantra* *(3) The Vedas reiterate the same roadmap , says Nanak

By reading and studying them
 one finds four doctrines in them
 Cherish all life, love, and meditate
 on the Lord
 and call the Self lowly
 Then O Nanak, will salvation be obtained.

As is characteristic of Nanak, the sobriety of the aggressive social curative is relieved by elements of the dramatic, the musical and the theatrical. The following poem substantiates the point. Its underlying thread of anger is masked by the element of theatrics laced with thick irony and sarcasm :

Both advance and sin are the King
 and Minister, and falsehood is
 the Master of Mint.
 Lust the assistant official, is summoned and consulted
 and they all sit together and chalk out evil plans.
 The subjects are blind and without wisdom,
 they quench with bribe, the official's flame of greed

The divines dance, play musical instruments
 and disguise and decorate themselves
 They shout aloud and sing
 of epic poems and heroic deeds

The fools call themselves scholars
 and with devices and cavils
 they love to amass wealth.
 The virtuous disfigure their acts of merit,
 by asking for the door of salvation.

They call themselves continent,
 leave home and hearth
 They know not the way of life.

... ..none calls himself imperfect.

If the weight of honour
 be put into the hind scale
 then alone O Nanak is man
 properly weighed. (GS 1546-1547)

While Nanak tends to be descriptive and even prescriptive sometimes, in the poem above, he beautifully creates a state of ecstasy that is almost frenzied and lunatic in its reaching out to the sentiment of the sublime. On the whole, one can say that "**Asa-di-Var**" is a collection of verse whose main subject is to ridicule, to question, and to attack the social-ills breeding beneath the blanket of religion and hypocrisy. Themes like, the mean place given to women in society, the hypocrisy of both Hindu and Muslim priests, the futile practice of asceticism, and the spiritual amnesia of the rich, are some of them. The work ends with the poet reaffirming that, "the Lord's is the true sacrificial thread. Such a thread is worn in the Lord's court and it breaks not."

Numerous legends and tales of miracles surround the life story of Nanak. Their source, the "**Janam Sakhis**", cannot be relied upon since they are the product of legend and faith. Having trudged through the legends and conjecture surrounding the birthplace and other detail of Nanak's life, and having cancelled out many a version against another, one is left with a bare outline of biographical detail upon which one can rely. Some repetition of the facts of Nanak's life (already given in chapter three on Bhakti in North

India,) I regret, cannot be helped, since it is necessary for the flow and convenience of the argument Here is an account of the life of Nanak, as told by McLeod.

Guru Nanak was born in 1469 AD, probably in the month of April His father was Kalu, a Bedi Khatri living in the village of Rai Bhoi di Talvandi, and his mother was named Tripta. Kalu and Tripta had one other child, a daughter whose name was probably Nanki, and whose husband's name was Jai Ram Guru Nanak was married to the daughter of Mula, a *Chona Khatri* of Batala, who had formerly resided in the village of Pokho di Randhavi His wife's name was Sulakhni, and two sons, Lakhmi Das and Siri Chand were born to them. As a young man, Guru Nanak worked in the town of Sultanpur, probably in the employment of Daulat Khan Lodi. This must have been during the last decade of the fifteenth century. While in Sultanpur, he experienced a sense of the divine call, and it was evidently in response to this that he began a period of travelling in and perhaps beyond India, accompanied for atleast some of the time by a bard named Mardana. Neither the pattern nor the extent of his travels can be established, but it may be assumed that he visited a number of the more important centres of both Hindu and Muslim pilgrimage. The period of travelling probably ended in or shortly before 1520 as it seems likely that Guru Nanak witnessed Babur's attack upon the town of Saidpur in that year. (146)

McLeod is of the opinion that Nanak's references to Babur in his works, seem to point to the invasions of the 1524 capture of Lahore which was ghastly, rather than the 1520 sack of Saidpur. However in the absence of any recorded evidence, it is difficult to come to any definite conclusion. For all we know, Nanak may have composed the 'Babur Vani' (*vani* means speech/poetry), even in 1526 A.D., at the end of Babur's string of five invasions. Quoted below is an excerpt from Nanak's 'Babur Vani' series, which also make a valuable first-hand historical document. Here we see Nanak's poetic genius and his narrative skill. The poem also reveals the poet's anguish and his faith in divine justice. He begins the verse on an interrogative note:

Where are those sports, stables, and horses?
Where are the drums and bugles?

Where are those sword-belts and chariots?

..... those mirrored finger-rings and
beautiful faces?

For this wealth many are ruined
and it has disgraced many.

Without deeds it is not amassed,
and it departs not with the dead
He whom the creator destroys, him
He first deprives of virtue.
When they heard of Babur's invasion,
Millions of Pirs failed to halt him.

He burned houses, resting places,
and strong palaces,
And the princes cut to pieces,
he caused to roll in dust.
No Mughal became blind
and no one wrought any miracle.

There raged a battle between
the Mughals and Pathans, and
the sword was wielded in the battlefield.
They the Mughals aimed and fired
their guns and they the Pathans
attacked with the elephants.

They whose letter has been torn
in God's court
must die, O my brethren.
There were the women of Muslims,
Hindus, Bhattis and Rajputs.

The robes of some were torn
 from head to foot, and some
 found dwelling in the cremation ground

How did they whose majestic husbands
 came not home,
 pass their night?

The Creator of himself acts
 and causes others to act
 To whom should we complain? (GS 1384-1386)

History narrates that during the reign of Ibrahim Lodi (1517 to 1526 A.D). Babur invaded Punjab five times. Plunder, loot, murder and rape was committed on a large scale without discriminating the Hindus from the Muslims. Driven by their lust for political power, Muslim rulers cared little for anything else. The Qazi fraternity too had lost its hold upon them. Around this time a lot of Hindus who had embraced Islam, converted back again. From this point onwards, the zeal of persecution was confined only to the Kings and the Qazis. The liberal minded members of the Muslim community and the Sufis no longer appreciated it. Besides the '**Babur Vani**' there are various hymns of Nanak in the **Granth** which were probably inspired by occasions like the birth of a new born, a marriage, or a death that Nanak happened to witness. Even today the same verses are sung, recited by the Sikh community on their respective occasions.

Coming back to the later part of Nanak's life; the poet had evidently received some land from a wealthy follower, on the right bank of the Ravi, where he settled to the life of a farmer and a householder, along with his family and a few disciples. Thus the village of Kartarpur was built. This probably took place after the Guru's travels had ended:

For the remainder of his life he lived in Kartarpur, but made brief journeys from there to places within easy reach. These destinations probably included Pak Pattan and Multan. Contacts with Nath Yogis were frequent and on one occasion the Guru evidently engaged a group of them in a debate at the village of Achal Batala.

During his years in Kartarpur, Guru Nanak must have attracted many disciples, one of whom was Lahina, a Trehan Khatri of Khadur. Lahina must have impressed the Guru by his devotion and ability, for prior to his death, Guru Nanak renamed him Angad and appointed him as his successor in preference to either of his sons. The Guru died in Kartarpur, towards the end of the fourth decade of the sixteenth century, in 1539 (McLeod 146)

An interesting incident (which may or may not be a myth), is connected with Nanak's appointment of Angad as his spiritual successor. The selection was based upon the severest possible tests including a weird one. The Guru asked Lehna, his own son Lakhmi Das and Sri Chand among others around him, to consume as food a carcass that was found lying. None proved faithful enough to obey Nanak's order except for Lehna. He got ready to obey the Guru's instruction but actually found no carcass on lifting the cover. Nanak bestowed his grace on Lehna, infused him with his own spirit and gave him the name Angad , meaning a part of his own *anga* (body). Guru Nanak placed an offering and bowed reverently before Angad before he died in 1539 A.D. at Kartarpur. The practical reform and foundations that Nanak had laid were to go a long way. Doctrinally he had clarified and summarized the vast theology of the Saints. He left behind him a large body of verse. And structurally he established among his disciples, the *sangat* (congregation) which met regularly to sing hymns and meditate, the *dharamsala* (religious hall) which provided a place for worship, and the *pangat* (also known as *langar*, the communal kitchen), attached to the *dharamsala*. The practice of *langar* served to physically break all barriers between caste. Scripturally also, he undermined the importance of the Vedic scriptures by replacing them with hymns of his own and those of other like-minded *bhaktas* and Sufis. (The hymns in one way were the Vedas reinterpreted):

The Rig Veda says, Ram is fully contained everywhere.
 And among the deities, Ram Nam is most exalted. .
 On uttering His *nam*, the sins depart.
 And then Nanak, man obtains salvation. (GS 1551)

Nanak and the Sants thus went all the way erasing the written word but not quite. They were rewriting upon the erased word, the *bani* (or *vani*) of the Sant community. The **Granth Sahib** was not alone in its efforts. Many other granths were compiled with the verse of Sants and Sufis by lesser known poets. Dadu Dayal was one *(4).

The alphabet called the *gurmukhi**(5) . was further improved upon by Nanak, and was given its final touches by Angad, who also added his own poetic work to the corpus that Nanak had left behind in the *gurmukhi* script. The first five Gurus composed extensive *bani* (verse) , and the fifth Guru, Arjan, bound the *bani* of all the Gurus with some hymns of several earlier mystic poets (i.e. the Sants, Sufis and bards), of high spiritual stature, in one big volume of sacred scriptures of the Sikhs, called the **Granth Sahib**.*(6) The compiling of the **Granth Sahib** was undertaken by Guru Arjan, as a preventive measure. Although on the face of it , the action seemed spontaneous, "the compilation of the **Granth** was a political act "(Nirmal Das 'Introduction', **Songs of Kabir**). All this while, Guru Arjan had been the target of his elder brother Prithi Chand's frustration and jealousy. One of Prithi Chand's ploys was the writing of verse under the name of Nanak by both Prithi Chand and his son Manohar Dass Meharban. Using the name 'Nanak' was a prerogative of the spiritual Sikh leaders alone. In the face of these counterfeit verses, Guru Arjan's decision must have been an attempt to control and ultimately discredit such compositions by codifying the true verses of the gurus in an authorized version. It was the result of Prithi Chand's treacherous scheming that Guru Arjan was eventually tortured and killed by the order of Jahangir in 1606 A.D.

Guru Arjan's murder entirely changed the previously peaceful Sikh community into an aggressively militarized one. Hereafter the gurus dedicated themselves to training their followers in the art of defence and warfare. From Jahangir onwards the Mughal emperors too became progressively stauncher, and unsparingly fanatic. Finally, the Muslim's persecution of the Hindus at large and their attempts at suppression of the Sikhs lead gradually to the militarisation of the Sikhs. The Khalsa – a society of warrior saints, was created by Guru Gobind Singh – the tenth Sikh guru. He also put an end to the successive line of Sikh gurus, and installed the **Adi Granth** itself as the manifest spiritual preceptor. Gobind Singh did not include his verse in the **Adi Granth**., except for one composition called '**Shabda Hazare**'. After ~~the~~ the Guru's demise, his work was compiled by Bhai Mani Singh in a collection called **The Granth Sahib of the Tenth**

Guru, 1734 A.D The dominant expression of Gobind Singh's verse is heroism and manly courage, rather than spirituality. As Nirmal Das rightly says.

The completed version of the **Adi Granth** came to about six thousand hymns. The distribution of authorship by the gurus themselves is as follows: Nanak (974), Angad (62), Amar Das (907), Ramdas (679), Arjan Dev (2,218), and Tegh Bahadur (115) The contributions of the Sants and Sufis are Jaidev (2), Farid (134), Beni (3), Namdev (60), Trilochan (4), Parmananda (1), Sadhana (1), Ramananda (1), Dhanna (4), Pipa (1), Sain (1), Kabir (54), Ravidas (41), Bhikan (2), and Surdas (2) Included also are many odes by court poets and musicians employed by the gurus.

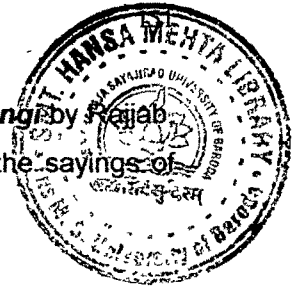
(7)

The language of the **Granth Sahib** is old Punjabi, which was a colloquial version of the *Apabrahmsa*. More appropriately speaking, it was a mix of *Khari Boli* (the dialect spoken in and around Delhi, Meerut), Persian and Sanskrit. It was known all over north India as Sant Bhasha or *Sadhbhasha* ('bhasha' in Hindi means, language). Baba Farid's compositions are all in this language.

Structurally the **Adi Granth** can be divided into three sections: (a) the introductory portion containing hymns that have acquired liturgical importance and use. (b) The ragas containing the hymns of the six Sikh gurus followed by those of the Sufis and Saints – in all thirty one. (c) thirdly, a miscellany of works that did not quite fit under the previous two categories. This section also contains the slokas of Kabir and Farid. As Kshitimohan Sen comments in his comprehensive work on *Medieval Mysticism In India*, the same method of arrangement was followed in the collection of songs and sayings by all the saints. Also, compilation of the **Granth Sahib** was not a solitary venture. There existed other such collections like the *Harare Vani* collected by Jagannath the disciple of Dadu Dayal. The **Angabandhu** – a collection of Dadu's writings put together by disciple Rajjab. And yet another, which by the order of Dadu, his disciples had collected:

It consists of the writings of sadhus of different sects. One of its copies is available with the sadhu Sankardas. ...and contains writings of sixty eight bhaktas (the **Adi Granth** has thirty one mystic poets), among whom there are many Mussulman names such as Garibdas, Kazi Kadam, Shaikh Farid, Bakhna, Rajjab and others. (*Medieval Mysticism* 111)

Besides these two more collections that deserve mention were the **Sarvang** by Rajab and the **Gunganja-nama** by Jagannath. Both are unique collections of the sayings of Indian *Sadhaks*.



Dadu (1544 to 1603 A.D.), like Kabir and Nanak was also driven by the quest for pure spirituality, and worked all his life towards unity between the Hindus and Muslims. Many of his disciples such as Rajjab, Bakhna and Wazind Khan among others, belonged to Islam. Kshatimohan Sen narrates

With Akbar the Great, Dadu had a discussion for forty days. The story goes that just after this Akbar removed his own name / from his coins and in its stead printed **Jalla Julalu hu** on the one side and **Allahu Akbar** on the reverse. (Medieval Mysticism 111-112)

The episode enhances our admiration for Akbar's vision, and liberal thinking. Until Akbar's times, and a little beyond (till the father's influence on son Jahangir lasted), the environment was supportive of religious syncretism, conducive to socio-spiritual reform, and a culture of give-and-take prevailed.

The Bhakti movement which had begun from the South, seventh century onwards, had by now spread all the way up to the west, north and east of India over a period of eight to nine centuries. There was the Vithoba movement of Jnanadeva in Maharashtra, Chaitanya's Vaishnava Bhakti in Bengal and Onssa and in Banaras the radical Brahmin scholar, Ramananda and his disciples, who sowed the seeds of further evolution in the Bhakti ethos, by removing all form of image-worship and distinctions based on caste differences. He was the first to initiate the concept of a common kitchen and *langar* among his disciples; and to commence the chapter of the Sant tradition.

The Sant tradition was essentially a synthesis of three principle dissenting movements: drawing its features mainly from (a) Vaishnava Bhakti - of which it was regarded as an offshoot or progression, (b) the Hatha yoga of the Nath yogis, (c) and a marginal contribution from Sufism. The Sants were in agreement with the Vaishnavas and the Sufis, that the basic religious response was, love. Vaishnava Bhakti was perceived as adopting the *Saguna* aspect of Bhakti while the Sants were seen as *Nirguna* bhaktas. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the fact that (a) the Sants offered their love directly to the supreme God and not to an *avatar* (ie a reincarnation), (b) their

expression of love was strictly through inward meditation and devotion and (c) thirdly since they completely discarded external ritual, their crusade against all forms of religious hegemony was profounder and more effective. The following poem confirms the general spirit of liberal spiritualism

Come Sajana, that I may behold thy vision
 Standing at the door of my house
 I watch for thee!
 Within my heart is great yearning

In my heart is great yearning
 hear me, O Sajan
 I have faith, in thee

Having beheld thy sight
 I have become fearless
 The pain of birth and death is ended.

.....(the bride) flowers,
 on seeing her Lord

The Lord is not far. He lives in every heart
 All the mortals are his brides (GS 2490-2491)

Composed in raga *Suhi*, the above poem uses the Vaishnava allegory of conjugal relationship with the suprasoul, all along retaining its Saguna concept of a formless universal, and all-abiding God. It is a clear statement of the Sant's account of borrowings and withdrawals. It demonstrates in particular, the ironing out of the erotic element, "... the eroticism of the Bhakti tradition of the middle ages has been consciously toned down. A strong moral censorship is seen at work so that erotic feeling is disciplined into conjugal warmth." (S.S. Sekhon 2871)

The influence of the Naths, which was considerable, emerges in much of the basic terminology used by Kabir and later by Nanak, in a rejection of all exterior forms, ceremonies, caste distinctions, sacred languages and scriptures, in a strong emphasis

upon unity as opposed to duality , and in the concept of a mystical union which destroys this duality (The chapter on Kabir, studies Nath terminology in some detail). It is significant that the term which both Kabir and Nanak use most frequently to express the experience of mystical union is *sahaj* – a word which not only transports us into the Nath theory but even beyond it and into the earlier world of *tantric* Buddhism. Nanak's works are seeped with Nath terminology which no longer retains in Nanak its Nath character , but passes instead for figurative language appropriate for mystic expression. Some frequently used allegoric expressions are, the tenth gate, ambrosial nectar, the soundless sound, nectar – water, the lotus and the bumblebee, the five evil passions, also called the five thieves, alms, begging bowl, binding together water, air , celestial strain at the tenth door, the great lamps of the sun and moon, the six ringed abbey of the human body, and sometimes Nanak's direct address to Gorakh and Machhindar.

Unlike Kabir who uses the *Ulatbamsi* technique to express the subvertive chaos of the spiritual vision, Nanak at such moments resorts to highly lofty and sublime forms of expression, often creating touchingly beautiful structures of metaphor and metonymy. On such occasions his style resonates with the finest poetry we can find in the *Upanishads*.

Sufism at first sight, seems to have contributed significantly to the Sant tradition. But the appearance, in McLeod's opinion, is misleading:

Affinities certainly exist, but they might not necessarily be the result of sufi influence. ... Islamic insistence upon the unity of the Divine may have consolidated the monotheistic base of sant thought, but their monotheism could also have been an inheritance from the Bhakti Movement. (213)

McLeod has a point but we cannot be so dismissive. The Sufi faith must be accredited for bringing to us the concept of God as a formless, universal soul, subtle as light. The *Koran* says no human form can ever be God . It defines god as pure truth – exactly the term which Nanak uses. In fact the following short verse (crisp and mantra-like) taken from the *Koran*, on pure Truth, compares beautifully with the invocation of Nanak's "Japji". It also reflects upon the poet's extensive scholarship. Here the divine is perceived as the true and singular:

Say
 It is God, Unique
 God the Ultimate
 God does not reproduce
 and is not reproduced
 And there is nothing at all
 equivalent to God (Tr Thomas Cleary 162)

Both, Kabir and Nanak often refer to the suprasoul as the light within. The raids and plunder of the Arabs , their destruction of the temples and idols must also have been instrumental in the Sants discarding all external signs and thus reducing unnecessary pain and asking the bewildered people to install both temple and god within. All else was penshable except the soul – the *atman*. The few terms that Nanak uses like *Hukam* , *Khuda*, *Patshah* etc he had absorbed into his own system, and reinterpreted . The Sants*(7), may not have used much of Sufi terminology in their work. Their poetry is largely an Indian representation with Nath terms, frequent references to Vedic systems and concepts and metaphors having Yogic impact, but their evolved concept of God as formless, omnipresent and One, must surely have infiltrated through Sufism. The short verse I have just quoted is an example from the *Koran*.

The *Upanishads*, as I understand , do refer to the state of nothingness as a goal, but never to the Godhead as single and formless. The chief doctrines that we encounter there are, firstly the idea of a supreme god *Prajapati* who is creator, and preserver of the universe. and secondly , the idea of an impersonal creative principle. *Prajapati* as Lord of creatures, was the main subject of theosophical speculation. Then came *Rudra* (later called Shiva), the God of the people, and thereafter Vishnu who was constantly identified with the all important sacrifices . Later on as the Bhakti movement evolved further, the Sants completely denied recognition to the Trinity gods, except for their symbolic value in poetry as such. Nanak in his verse repeatedly refers to them as the elements of nature, working under God's Hukam



I shall quote a page out of J.S.Grewal's book, ***Guru Nanak In History***, to catch up with the reality of day to day existence at the local level among people living around the bend of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries:

The mutual contact of Hindus and Muslims had been gradually developing at several levels. In politics and administration, a closer contact was imposed by the historical circumstance and it was paralleled by a greater / give- and- take in the economic sphere. If some Hindu works are being translated into Persian for the advantage of edification of Persian knowing Muslims, many Hindus were learning and teaching Persian or even using it as the medium of artistic expressions. Regional languages are being adopted by some of the Sufis for a communication of their ideas to both Muslims and Hindus. Certain fairs and festivals were attended by both Hindus and Muslims and, among the common people, it was perhaps not uncommon to worship a legendary saint or a local deity.

Even among the serious professors of religion it was not uncommon to exchange ideas on matters of belief and practice. Mutual appreciation resulted sometimes in piece-meal adoption of ideas or practices from a faith other than one's own. In the fifteenth century Muslim Sufis, it is said, mixed with Hindu Sadhus, Sannyasis and Jogis for inspiration and guidance, without acknowledging the source in public. Similarities between different forms of faith were occasionally recognised and appreciated. Some new forms of belief and practice were adding to the richness and variety of the religious scene. And there was a good deal of rivalry between the various religious groups. In the midst of this rivalry, / many of the contestants had come to believe that salvation was the birthright of every human being irrespective of his caste, creed or sex.

On the whole it was a rich and lively religious atmosphere. And it was this atmosphere that Guru Nanak breathed. (***GN in History*** 138-139-140)

Nanak like his Sant comrades, carried forth the idiom of reformative protest, which had characterised the tradition of the Bhakti movement in particular the tradition of the Saints. In the following passages, it will be my endeavour to examine how far the poet was a part of the Sant tradition, where his contributions lay, and how he steered the movement further.

Since the time of Gautama Buddha, the Indian religious sentiment had come to harbour two attitudes – one that cherishes the Vedas and the *Upanishads* and the other that firmly denied their scriptural authority, favouring instead, the path of enlightenment gained through personal experience of the supreme. The Sants were situated in the second line of tradition. On the whole they sought to deny the accepted notions of the holy – they rejected the Vedas, the *Upanishads*, idol worship, ritual, Brahminism, the castes system and all else that went with it.

(a) .. the thread is spun from cotton.
the Brahman comes and twists it.

The goat is killed. cooked and eaten
and everyone then says
'put on the sacred thread.'

when the thread wears off
it is thrown and replaced
by another

Why should the thread break
if it has any strength? (GS 1555)

(b) Where have Hindus and Turks come from?

Who started these fine distinctions ?
Think, ponder in your heart fool
who will go to heaven or hell?

.....

For love of woman
you circumcise –
I shall never believe O brother.
If Khuda had wished me to be a Turk
He would have cut it off himself... (GS 1537)

The following couplets on the theme of 'flesh', are from Nanak's *Var* in raga *Malhar*. These compositions shock the reader out of his/her frigid composure (even today), and leave a lasting impact. The following poem parodies notions of non-vegetarianism and piety among other things:

(c) Flesh, flesh the fools quarrel

They know not of meditation and gnosis

They know not what is flesh,
and what the green, or in what
does Sin consist.

It was a habit of the gods
to kill rhinoceros and perform
sacred feasts after burning the offerings.

They who abandon meat and hold
their nose when sitting near it,
devour men at night.

They practice hypocrisy and flaunt it
Ignorant of his meditation and gnosis.
Nanak, what can we say to the blind?

... He is blind who does blind deeds.
... When man and woman meet at night
with flesh they co- habit.

From flesh we are conceived , from flesh born.
We are the vessels of flesh.

The soul too has found abode in flesh
..

The Puranas and the Muslim's Koran
 both sanction flesh
 Flesh it has been in the four ages.

O Pandit, you understand not yourself
 But you instruct people.
 How wise you are indeed

O Brahman
 Do you know from where this flesh has sprung?

From water are produced corn,
 sugarcane, cotton.
 And from water the three worlds
 are said to have sprung

Says the water 'I am good in many ways.
 Many are my modifications.'

Abandoning all these relishes,
 one becomes a solitarian, Nanak deliberates (GS 4256-4257)

The Sants denied all visible, external manifestations, and advocated instead , a devotion that was subtle, natural, free of all earthly ritual and bondage, and based upon love and devotion for a Godhead that was itself eternal, non-incarnated, and *Nirguna* (without attributes). The Sants define god as the universal goal, as the immanent spirit, that moves the cloud, or cracks the chicken egg and ; parts a continent into two pieces of land by bringing in the ocean. It was this very thirst, among the Bhakti, Sant, and Sufi poets, for divine experience, best reflected in His creation around us and within in the stirrings of the soul moved by the treasure of sublime experience.

In such a modern and transcendental tradition a Kant , a Coleridge, or a Wordsworth would not have been out of place The medieval poets's love affair with sublimity gave

vent to sublime expression. The Bhakti movement in medieval India brought with it, not only religious reform, but also a linguistic and literary revolution of the highest possible order. It was the most modern of movements of reform until late nineteenth century, when the sentiment of nationality and love for the mother land gripped the peoples imagination, once again binding them in one common thread.

The mystic poets, excelled themselves by transcending the material and the obvious. This is where their poetic appeal and strength lies. By translating divinity into the subtlest of experiences, the Sants had reached the same plain where great poets, great thinkers, great musicians and great scientists reach in their quest for truth and reality in their subtlest and final forms. I am tempted at this point, to mention Kant's *Critique Of Judgement*, where Immanuel Kant delves into the realms of 'sublime' and 'transcendental' experience. According to Kant, the sublime is purely a state within the mind. He writes, "Sublime is the name given to what is absolutely great. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone. Hence the sublime is to be sought only in our own ideas" (*Cr. of Judgement* 97)

Devotion for the Medieval age mystics of India was essentially a focusing upon the God beyond the God, whose abode was silence (*anahad naad* – the "soundless sound" – of Om), and whose form was as subtle as *light* – that luminous aura of nothingness. There are frequent references to **god as divine light** in the poetry of the Sants. Nanak's concept of the divine is best expressed through his *mool mantra* i.e. the "invocation" to the 'Japji':

[In translation]

The one universal being

the real

the spirit, creator.

The controller and enjoyer,

beyond restraint, beyond rancor

He is the timeless form .

Never born. self creating

He is known by the Guru's grace.

[In transliteration]

Ik Omkar

Satnam

Karta Purakh

Nirbhau Nirvair

Akal Moorat

Ajooni,

Sai Bhang

Guru Prasad.

(Tr. myself)

(*Granth Saheb* 1)

Nanak defines the divine as the one only, who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and immanent. In his address he often uses terms like *Hari, Ram, Gopal, Paramesvar, Jagdis, Prabhu, Allah, Khuda, Padshah, Sahib, Rabba, Swami*, etc. to refer to God, besides using adjectives like O Formless one, or O Immanent Being. and so on. The name he uses most frequently is, *Hari*. The role of the guru in the process of salvation has been underscored by both Kabir and Nanak, for whom the guru is synonymous with the immediate representation of the divine. A Guru (which would translate as master, in English) was someone who had arrived at the perfected state and who in turn helped others achieve that state of perfection. Finding such a perfect one was indeed, tough. Both the young Kabir and Nanak, according to one opinion, had searched relentlessly for a spiritual guru with little success. They had finally settled with their inner voice to guide them and be their light / guru.

In the quest for salvation, a heart full of intense devotion was regarded as the most essential ingredient. Here the Sants went a step further than the Vaishnavites. They argued that the devotees love for God was not enough material, the grace of God indicating that salvation be granted, was the other crucial requisite. The divine grace translates itself through the *shabad* (i.e inner voice/vision) . In compositions of both Nanak and Kabir, there is a good deal of emphasis upon the absolute need for the guru and the guru's grace. The guru more often is, the shabad, the inner voice, the illumined conscience (that lies dormant in people at large), of the fearless champion of truth. Therefore the mystics stress upon inner cleaning and purging so that grace can be received when it is given. In his verse Nanak repeatedly emphasises this aspect of Bhakti .

The mortal wanders, strays, and staggers
in eighty four lacs of births.
Not knowing the Guru he is caught
in the noose of Yamadut.

.....

If man's inner strife is ended,
then he sings the Lord's praise

and through the satguru
merges in the sahaj

... ..

Rare is the one, who washes off
his inner filth with the Name.

Yes some rare one practices,
the truth, by the Guru's grace

Then cease his comings and goings ('Prabhati', GS 4437-4438)

Thus the *shabad* as the vehicle of salvation which enables man to wash off ego (*haumai* is the term Nanak uses), and to acquire detachment from *maya*. In Nanak's system of theology, the practice of truth (*sachh*), meditation on the word (*shabad*), and upon the essence (i.e. *Nam*), are essentials for reaching the state of the *sahaj* – the perfect union with the Divine.

To categorise and distinguish between the *shabad* and *nam* is not easy, for often they are used interchangeably. *Nam* (an esoteric term for essence), seems to refer to the object of salvation and *shabad* is the medium to salvation. *Nam* therefore is the material (soul) and *shabad* the means (the vision) which is imparted to a seeker / devotee by the Guru. Another concept which is integral to Nanak's theology is that of *hukam* (command or will of the divine order) The *hukam* as conceived by Nanak is an all-embracing principle. The concept of *hukam* is very essential to his philosophy. It is the subject of the very first stanza of Nanak's "Japji" .

By His *hukam* the universe comes to be –
though it is difficult to say how it is so.
By His *hukam* the living beings come to be
and by His *hukam* they receive merit.
By His *hukam* exist the high and the low,
and by *hukam* each obtains his share of joy and grief.
Some receive gifts by His *hukam* some toil in vain.

Whatever is, is by His will, nothing beyond its sway
Who understands His *hukam* alone finds freedom from *haumai*.

(Tr Myself 'Japji' GS 1)

Hukam has originally been translated by Sohan Singh, (in *The Seeker's Path*), as will, and *haumai* as ego. I have purposely retained the original terms, in my translation of the *paun* on *hukam*, in the "Japji". Again and again in his songs, Nanak asks people to stop fretting and submit to the *hukam* of the divine order which we ordinary mortals cannot understand. Even in the sack and pillage of Saiyadpur, by Babur and his armies, the poet sees the operation of the divine order or *hukam*. The following verse reflects the poet's anguish and the acceptance of His *hukam*.

Having conquered Khurasan, Babur has terrified Hindustan
 The Creator takes not the blame on Himself,
 and has sent the Mughal as death's myrmidon.
 So much beating was inflicted that people shneked
 Did thou not feel compassion?
 Those O Maker are the equal Master of all.
 If a mighty man smites another mighty man,
 the mind is not angered.
 If a powerful tiger falling on a herd, kills it,
 then its Master is to be questioned.
 The dogs have spoiled and laid waste
 the priceless country
 and no one pays heed to the deed...

Towards the end of the poem, Nanak calls Babur, a worm and attributes the whole incident of the plunder, to the workings of the divine will, as part of the divine law of justice, and perhaps a deserving punishment for a people riding on ego.

... O Lord, Thou thyself join and
 thyself separate, and this
 is thy greatness

If someone gives himself a big name
 and revels to please his mind,

in the eyes of Rabb(a), he is but a worm,
 for all the corn that he pecks
 If the mortal remains dead of ego
 in his life, Nanak then alone can he
 reap the fruit of worship. (Tr. M Singh GS 1200-1201)

While the *bhava* holds a significant place in Sant theology, Nanak attaches to it, the emotion of **fear** which according to him is, a prerequisite to the love of god. The concept of the "fear of God" in Nanak is the other side of the coin of "love of God". The fear element is equally essential since it remote controls the entire universe, inspires unquestioned obedience to his *hukam* (command/will), and keeps the world and its creatures from straying. The fear of God extinguishes other minor fears in the devotee and helps him/ her be fearless and undaunted by the travails of life. A few sample verses from the **Granth Sahib** :

In fear the wind, and breeze ever blow
 In fear flow lacs of rivers

In fear are the men of miracles,
 Buddhas, the demigods and the yogis.

In fear is stretched the sky..... ..
 .. The Lord has written the writ of His fear
 on the foreheads of all.

Nanak, the true, formless, alone is fearless (GS 1531-1532)

All the Sant poets, including Nanak and Kabir , were married men who led a family life and worked for their living. Stress was laid on leading a balanced householder's life, while practising meditation (*nam japana*), truth (*sachh*), and an implicit faith in the divine will (*hukam*), which would finally lead to complete surrender followed by a union with the Godhead. The Sants, as we know, carried on with their occupational jobs all their life. Ravidas remained a cobbler, Sain a barber, Kabir a weaver, Namdev a calico printer, Dadu a cotton carder, and Nanak a farmer (an occupation he took up by choice).

Reading through the verse of Nanak, one is struck by the realisation that he was not only a great mystic, but an equally sound scholar and thinker. His reference to Vedic theology and to yogic practices is quite profuse. His compositions are generally so structured as to contain some *slokas* / *pauris* of pure poetry interspersed with a *sloka* or two, expressing the philosophy of the poet. Then again come a few *slokas* of pure poetry which can at once be minute in detail and magnificent in its aspect; followed by a doze of Nanak's philosophy. The strategy of interspersing poetry with a couplet here and there of reformative/ theologic value, is fine when it is spare. But there are times when the message of the sage overrides the interests of the poem, and takes away from its strength. Considering that Nanak was a sensitive poet with a considerable body of excellent poetry to his credit, one wonders if the over-doze of theology in some of his compositions is the result of external editing, induced later on, to serve the interests of the sect. However, poetry for Nanak was a serious job, since it was also the only medium of communication for bringing about social reform, and for establishing for the Sant (and Sikh) tradition, the ideal text for spiritual growth and healthy living. Nanak was the last of the major Sant poets and the first / founder poet of the Sikh faith. The Sant poets had taught people to become warriors of the soul and to pull out the tree of temptation, ego, and sin, like weed. The nine Sikh gurus who were to follow Nanak, would translate the tenets of the Sant tradition, and become, not only warriors of the soul, but warriors of the soil as well.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Nanak's poetry has not received so far, the attention it deserves (which could even be included as a part of the findings of this work.!) By now however, an imaginative reader would have formed some opinion about the poetic strength and grace of Nanak's verse, which is many times stronger in the original language. Despite the loss of its linguistic flavour, terseness of expression, and the original rhythm, magnified by the absence of sophisticated handling in the hands of a literature person equally familiar with the English language and prosody; Nanak's translated poetry comes forth as a gem that needs polishing. Let us read the following poem in this light. Notice the sublime landscapic style so characteristic of Nanak, mark the spirit of transcendence and how he tropes upon the metaphor of the bumble bee!

Himself the bumble bee, the flower, the creeper.

By Himself (He) unites man

to the company of friends saintly.
 O bumble bee
 suck such fragrance that the trees
 may bloom, and the woods, reverdure
 Sahib Himself is Laxmi and
 Himself her spouse
 Installing the world. He Himself enjoys it
 Himself the calf, cow and milk,
 Himself the pillar of the body mansion
 Himself the deed and the doer... .
 And by Himself becoming the devotee
 He reflects
 upon Himself.

..... (GS 3924)

In Kabir one meets a degree of obscurity and at times contradicting statements, both of which we do not find in Nanak. As McLeod so aptly propounds:

Kabir was above all a mystic and the pattern of his thought is determined by this quality. The result is both profundity and obscurity... A poem of pronounced mystical inclinations would doubtless find in Kabir's works, something of the depth of meaning which Kabir himself had experienced, but most men would not. Many could however appreciate the pattern which Guru Nanak sought to expound,... . Kabir's works have commanded an immense popularity, but the popularity has been accorded to thoughts in isolation, not to an integrated pattern of belief. It has been the pithy saying, the striking aphorism, which has brought Kabir his popularity.... The Kabir panthis possess a system of belief, but it is one which remotely resembles the original teaching of the sect's eponymous founder. ...Guru Nanak on the other hand produced a coherent pattern and one which, with some addition by later gurus is followed to this day by orthodox Sikhism. In his own way, Guru Nanak was also a mystic and, as with Kabir, the climax of his thought is to be found in an ineffable union with God, the formless one. The climax itself was beyond analysis or expression, but not the path to it, and in this respect Guru Nanak is much clearer than Kabir. (McLeod 149-150)

Nanak expounds his thoughts in a more readily understandable fashion. The clarity and coherence of his thought also contribute to the effectiveness of his communication. In his works Nanak comes through as a poet who is highly concerned for the moral and spiritual welfare of humanity, towards which end his poetry (mostly sung in a particular raga), becomes a medium of qualitative and thought provoking communication. Clarity is one of Nanak's strong points, which somehow in Nanak never detracts from the aura and mystery of the poem, which is generally sculpted through references to sublime thought and ethereal metaphors. Thus what Kabir creates through his *ulatbamsi* style and dense figurative style, Nanak makes up for it by appealing to our heightened sense of the harmonious, the ungraspable and the sublime which is vast, infinite and varied. His love of nature, his sensibility and the pristine images born out of it remind one of Wordsworth. (The two seem to share a similar poetic sensibility and spiritual perception.) We cannot go into the details of the comparison, but juxtaposed here are two poems that will give the reader a better judgement: (a) Nanak's poem sees the entire nature as singing a eulogy to the almighty:

A plate-like sky,
the sun and moon
its prayer lamps,
the milkyway of pearls!
Incense is the sandal-tree
its fragrance the breeze fans constantly.
And the lush green wealth of forests makes flower offerings..

How beautiful is your prayer service!
Celestial symphonies play within
O eraser of this life-death ring.

Thousand-eyed and yet sans eyes
Thousand-eyed and yet formless
Without nostrils and yet a plenty, O omnipresent one...

Your soul the soul of all life-form,
Your flame burns bright in every spirit.

The Lord's guidance is the match stick,
Thus lit alone, the *arti* completes. (Tr Myself GS 2174)

(b) A stanza from Wordsworth's pastoral poem "Michael" which is the story of a simple soul's leading on the edge of the woods, a life of divine simplicity .

Upon the forest-side in Grasmere Vale
There dwelt a shepherd, Michael was his name,
An old man, stout of heart and strong of limb. .
Of an unusual strength : his mind was keen,
Intense and frugal, apt for all affairs,
And in his shepherds calling he was prompt
And watchful more than ordinary men.
Hence had he learned the meaning of all winds,
Of blasts of every tone, and, oftentimes,
When others heeded not, He heard the South
Make subterraneous music, like the noise
Of bagpipers on distant Highland hills . . (*The Golden Treasury Of
Longer Poems* 199)

Both Nanak and Wordsworth share the same sage like vision of the poet soul towards nature which for them is a source of divine mystery , music and unparalleled beauty. Thus the religion of the Sant poets was not centred around temple and deity, but is the earliest modern thought and expression we can find in Indian history. It would be quite correct to say that both Nanak and Kabir's was a religion of experience, of the 'real' rather than the notional. They both offer a synthesis, and in each case the nature of the synthesis reflects the personality of the author. While Nanak reminds one of Wordsworth, Kabir with his cocky, reckless and highly mystical style brings to one's mind the same depth and mystery which one associates with the style of Coleridge. A comparative study would be very interesting. But for that , one would need to write another thesis.

It was an ongoing practice with the *Saguna* and *Nirguna* Bhakti poets, to discard Sanskrit and compose in the vernacular language. In the North Indian belt it was Ramananda who initiated this practice. The language in which Nanak composed his verse was called *Sadhbhasha*. There were two varieties of Hindi being spoken in the medieval age (a) Western Hindi whose parent language was *Prakrit Sauraseni* and (b) Eastern Hindi, which had developed from the *Prakrit Ardhamagadhi*. The principal dialects of western Hindi were, *Bangroo* (spoken in the western Ganges and south-east Punjab), *Braj bhasha* (of the Mathura region), *Bundeli* (of Bundel Khand and Narmada valley), and *Khari Boli*, the language spoken around Meerut and Delhi* (8). The language in which Nanak composed verse was mainly *Khari Boli* (also referred to as colloquial Punjabi), with elements drawn in from Old Rajasthani, Sanskrit and Persian.

Another aspect of Nanak's poetry-writing was its relation with music. Not only did its prosody have a rhythm and an incantatory lilt to it, the poems were also written to be sung at different places on various occasions during Nanak's travels with his disciples Bala and Mardana. Nanak was fond of music, and had a good working knowledge of Indian classical ragas (musical measures) and was a good composer. Nanak's disciple Mardana too was a good singer, who accompanied him constantly on these tours with his rebeck. Mardana was a practising Muslim who sang *kirtan*. The other companion, Bala was a Hindu Jat and had accompanied Nanak on a few of his tours. Music, for Nanak (as for Kabir and others), was the purest mode of devotion. Once he settled in Kartarpur to a farmer's life, *satsang* became a regular activity. Later on, the works of Nanak and the other Sant *bani* compiled in the ***Granth Sahib***, (which includes the six Sikh poets and thirty one non-Sikh mystic poets), came to be regarded as the word of the Guru which was sung by Ragis (singers who only sing from the guru *bani*), based on the ragas in which it had been composed. It is amazing but the Sikh tradition gave rise to four kinds of religious singing. First being the traditional *kirtan* sung by the *Ragis*, which is an expression of Bhakti, a quest for the *niranjan*, the eternal being. This music is meditative, invocative and uplifting. The prime focus here is the word (i.e. poetry), not music. The second variety is that sung by the descendants of Mardana who have preserved the tradition set by Mardana, through the centuries. They are known as *Rhababis* – practising Muslims who sing *kirtan*. Then there were the *Dhadis* – bards from the time of the sixth Guru Hargobind Singh, in the early seventeenth century. They would sing standing upright. The stance had changed because the Gurus wrote odes in

a fast moving meter to popularise an aggressive form. This form of singing today has disappeared . The fourth type is that of the two and a half-hour long morning prayer , **"Asa-di-Var"** which was borrowed from the folklore of Rajasthan. (Gathered from an interview - *A Faith That Sings* - with Bhai Avtar Singh Ragi in the ***Times Of India***)

A much less talked about facet of Nanak's poetry is its expression of boundless joy and beauty in its union with the divine and the divine's creation, which mirrors the glory of the formless, all pervading spirit. He speaks of the flora and fauna of the Central Punjab and the seasons and trades of the place of his birth :

Just as the buckets hung on the chain
of the Persian wheel rotate,
emptying one and filling another.

So is this play of my Husband.
He acts as is his wondrous glory .. ('Prabhati', **GS 4386**)

The animal imagery in Nanak often has an element of the other world. The poet relates himself with the *Chakwi* who is separated from the *Chakwa* at night, or with the *Chatrik* who hangs upside-down from the tree-branch waiting for the rain drops to fall into his open mouth*(9). He employs these "unnatural" metaphors only when he has to give the philosophical exposition of a point of traditional philosophy, but never when he employs nature as the background of his theme or emotions. The following poem is a sample of the unusual metaphor. It begins with an address to a swan where Nanak asks the swan (as one wayfarer might ask another) if she has ever seen the *Sahib*. In the next stanza he himself becomes a swan leaving behind the body which is a mere compound of air, water, earth and fire. But even the state of spiritual awakening is got only if one has a good destiny. The poem , in raga *Malhar*

Thou wearest white clothes and
speakest sweet words.
Sharp is thine nose and black thine eyes.
Hast thou ever seen thy Lord O sister?

By thy night I fly, O my Sahib,

and flying up ascend the sky.
 I see my Sahib in water, dry land,
 mountains, riverbanks, places,
 and interspaces, O brother

He who has fashioned the body
 has also provided features and put within
 an intense thirst, and desire to fly.

.....

Neither this body shall go nor shall go
 its wings in the yonder.
 for it is the mere aggregate of air, water, and fire.
 Nanak if man has good destiny
 he meditates on Him, by adopting
 the Guru as his Pir.

This wise the soul, abiding in this body,
 merges in the Sahib (GS 4147).

While most of the quoted poems, translated by Manmohan Singh, have passed through some edition at my hands*(10), the above quoted poem has been inserted exactly as I found it in the **Granth Sahib** version. I have only replaced the late Manmohan Singh's use of expressions like 'True Lord' and 'God' with the originally used terms like *Pir* and *Sahib*. Another poem with some editing in raga *Malhar*. Here again, Nanak is a solitary swan, whose haunting stoicism conveys a pristine depth, and an eerie sense of stillness which brings one close to an experience of divinity. An excerpt:

The pied cuckoo and the fish find peace
 through water,
 and to the deer the bell's note is pleasing
 the sparrow hawk chirps through the night.

Flying amidst trees and plants I remain hungry,
 but by lovingly in-drinking the Name
 I am sated.

My eyes gaze is fixed on Thee
 my tongue cnes out thy Name
 and I thirst for thy vision,
 O Lord of the Will

..... (GS 4203)

Nanak's concept of poetry does not rest so much on technical skill (the use of figures of speech like interrogation, alliteration, exclamation and wordplay is minimal) , as it does on the message and its poetic appeal. The sweep of his subject matter is so great as to be almost cosmic. As Madanjit Kaur and Piar Singh observe in ***Guru Nanak's Life And Thought*** :

From a flower in the field or the cooing of a bird in the bush, he goes to the sun and the moon, the seas and the mountains and the starlit firmament above, and the totality of forces that sustain them. From the crow black tresses of a newly married maiden which are oiled with rare scents before she is taken into captivity by the invading hordes of Babur, he changes to fundamental causes which lie at the rise and decline of nations. There is not much on earth and under the sun which escapes the touch of his poetic impulse, and the language itself becomes a pliant servant in his hands to suit the subject matter. Nothing comparable is to be found in the whole range of the Indian literature, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, except certain portions of the Rig Veda. (GS 181-182)

Yes, the poet's style does bear an affinity with the style of some portions of the ***Rig Veda*** and the ***Upanishads***. However, I cannot join M. Kaur and P. Singh in their claim that "nothing comparable to Nanak's poetry is to be found ...in all of Indian Literature..", for I have not read all that comes under ancient, medieval and modern Indian Literature. Scholarship on Nanak, as I mentioned earlier, in the past has often been guided by the parochial reverence of the Sikh community. Reading through Nanak's poetry , one is

amazed to see the numerous references he makes to the celestially controlled systems of the Universe listed in the **Rig Veda**, the **Upanishads**, (especially, the **Mandukya**, the **Chandogya**, the **Prasna** and the **Katha Upanishads**), and in the **Bhagvad Gita**. His frequent references include the sixty-eight pilgrim stations, the eighteen supernatural powers, the eighteen castes, the seven underworlds, the six religious rites, the nine regions of earth, the five nectars and so on --- the list is exhaustive

His poetic style, and many of the metaphors he uses also bear a similarity with the verses in the **Upanishads**. For instance the following *shloka* (couplet) from the **Katha Upanishad** could almost pass for a hymn by Nanak

Beyond the senses are the objects (of the senses)
and beyond the objects is the mind;
beyond the mind is the understanding
and beyond the understanding is the great self
Beyond the great self is the unmanifest,
beyond which is the spirit.
Beyond the spirit there is nothing.
That is the end (of the journey)
That is the final goal (Tr. Radhakrishnan **The Principal Upanishads** 625)

Nanak's approach to the concept of Creation also finds the influence of the **Upanishads**. The following *shlokas* are from the **Chandogya Upanishad**:

The Sun is Brahman – this is the teaching
An explanation thereof (is this). In the beginning
this (world) was non-existent. It became existent.
It grew. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year.
It burst open, then came out of the egg shell, two parts,
one of silver and the other of gold.

That which was of silver is this earth, that
which was of gold is the sky
What was the outer membrane is the mountains,
that which was the inner membrane

is the mist with the clouds
 What were the veins are rivers
 What was the fluid within is the ocean
 And what was born from it is the yonder sun (*The Principal Upanishads* 399)

The two parts of the egg, of silver and gold translate into figurative material that Nanak uses in a poem in Raga *Basant*. Even other references like, the water of the Ganges , the fine rice and milk , the fire and firewood etc. to which the *Upanishads* make ritualistic reference when prescribing something, alludes to the *Upanishads*. The poem :

Cooking place is of gold, and of gold are the vessels
 The silver lines of the square are extended afar

The water is of the Ganges and
 the fire from the firewood of
Carissa carandaa tree

The food is of the fine rice
 boiled in milk.

O my soul, these are not at all of any account,
 until thou art saturated with the true Name. (*GS* 3849)

Nanak's verse shares with the *Upanishads*, the same prosodic rhythm, the same serenity, and equipment to explain all, with the primitive sense of beauty. In the poem above, he refutes the notion of sacredness, but with such a feel for purity, that when he negates the relevance of all ritual in the last couplet, one is taken by surprise

The founding sound of the *anahad nada* (the "soundless music" to which the mystics refer), is often ascribed as Om. The *Om*, perceived as complete in itself, as the all containing, Om as brahmin. A verse from the *Mandukya Upanishad* on the sound Om (spelt here as "Aum") :

Aum, this syllable is all This An explanation

All that is the past, the present, and the future, all this
is only the syllable Aum. And whatever else there is
beyond the threefold time,
that too is only the syllable Aum. (*The Principal Upanishads* 695)

Three *Upanishads* – the *Mandukya*, the *Katha*, and the *Prashna* – speak about the concept of Om (Aum), which Nanak has incorporated in the invocation of the “Japji”. The great tree with leaves representing the songs of the Vedas, described in chapter fifteen of *Bhagvad Gita* is also mentioned in the *Granth Sahib*. The philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads was later elaborated into six systems (the *samkhya*, *yoga*, *nyaya*, *vaishesika*, *mimamsa* and *vedanta*), to which Nanak often refers in his compositions. One such reference reads like this “Six the sacred texts, / six the gurus who wrote them / and six the messages they left.” Nanak obviously had a great deal of familiarity with the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* as is apparent from the detailed allusions he makes to them. Even his concept of what poetry should be like is based upon the lofty poetic standards of the *Upanishad*, with which he shares a similar poetic sensibility and an ecstatic stance before the treasures of nature/ creation. But this is where the similarity ends.

In spirit however Nanak was both a Sufi and a Sant. A hardcore iconoclast like his forerunner Kabir, a humanist, a spiritualist, and a social reformer. He was probably the first poet to stand openly by the lot of women and to promote the value of their status as mothers and a men’s partners in life. Contradicting the *Upanishad’s* overemphasis upon the role of the male semen in the regeneration of life, Nanak wrote:

Within a woman, the man is conceived,
and from a woman he is born.
With a woman he is betrothed and married,
It is a woman a man befriends
and the system of propagation sustains.
When one’s wife dies, another is sought.
It is through a woman that man restrains his passions
Why call her bad from whom are delivered, kings?
From a woman a woman is born
Without a woman there can be none.

Nanak, only the one True Lord is without a woman ('Asa-di-Var' GS 1563)

It must be noted that nowhere in Nanak's entire work do we find derogatory reference to a woman, not even as Maya the temptress is she derided. (In Kabir's poetry the temptress Maya -- not woman directly -- comes under heavy shelling) Concerned about the upliftment of women, who are the foundation of a society, Nanak often refers to the woman kind as mothers and life partners' often he equates spiritual happiness with connubial bliss. As Anil Chandra Bannerjee puts it, "the idealisation of connubial bliss was intended to soften the rigours of daily life and to show that heaven and earth could meet even in humble homes" (*GN and His Times* 189). Adding further to Bannerjee's statement, one can say that by idealizing the conjugal relationship, Nanak's verse also irons out the erotic element so characteristic of Vaishnava Bhakti poetry, and introduces instead, a strong moral code.

One Sufi poet who influenced Nanak considerably, is a must-mention before I can close the chapter. And that is Baba Farid, whose hymns are also included in the *Granth Sahib*. Baba Farid (1173 to 1265 A.D.) was a liberated spiritualist, and a God-seeker in the true sense of the Chisti Sufi order. He had both Muslim and Hindu following which often annoyed the ruling Sultans of his times. He wrote poetry of a high order and was among the first poets to compose in Punjabi. His compositions were discovered by Nanak (who seems to have absorbed comparatively more of the Sufi influence as I have pointed out during the chapter). Farid's verse finds substantial place in the *Granth Sahib*, along with his other mystic comrades all converging from various faiths and walks of life, in a congenial and cosmopolitan atmosphere. Among other forerunners of Nanak in Punjabi poetry are the yogis of North India, in particular, Charpat (890 – 990 A.D.), and Gorakh Nath (940 - 1031 A.D.). However their work , available to us today, is extremely scattered and scanty. We can therefore safely say, the Nanak was the first major poet of Punjabi literature, who combined in himself the stature and genius of a great man of letters.

Nanak was the first major poet of Punjabi literature. The poet also left behind him a well-structured system of theology; and most important of all, Nanak steered the Sant tradition further by translating the modern doctrines of the Sants into practical life. The Bhakti and the Sant traditions had already induced the practice of *satsang* (community

singing of elevating mystic hymns), among the Indian public. Nanak added to this the practice of *langar* where all used to sit together and eat food cooked in a common kitchen. A practical means of erasing caste distinctions – this was first begun by Ramananda, but it was not followed too seriously. (Later, in the reformist revival of the nineteenth century Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi would undertake the task of removing caste distinctions with a fierceness). Another unique concept he introduced was that of *daswandh* (*das* meaning the number ten, and *daswandh* meaning the tenth portion) According to the *daswandh* principal, every ideal/ perfect human being was obliged to regularly use one tenth of his earnings for the benefit of his society. The idea was to give formal credence to the habit of sharing and to inculcate among people a sense of social responsibility – a sentiment so lacking in our society today.

The most significant contribution that Nanak made to society was, initiating the culture of passing-on the spiritual leadership of a religion which was at that point in time, a non religion (Nanak disowned all social garbs. He is well known for saying, 'There is no Hindu. No Muslim'.) The privilege of the *guru-gaddi* (as we know from the "corpse incident"), was very hard earned. It was installed upon one who had gone far on the path of *sahaj marg*, and would be able to inspire and guide the herd of humanity. It should be perceived as a very practical and responsible decision on Nanak's part. For he ensured that the disciples were in good care after his demise and that the vision of the Sants lasted stronger down the centuries.

Indeed, great was the impact made by the Bhakti Movement upon the country's collective psyche. Between the two of our poets, Time accorded more popularity to Kabir, and to Nanak it gave an organised community of strong following. The Sant philosophy and the implementation of its tenets by Nanak (and by the nine gurus who were the result of the Sant foundations), upon the future generation brought forth rich dividends in history. The tradition of successive spiritual preceptors (selected after rigorous screening), maintained a tight leash of control; supervising and grooming like a gardener, the grand plan of an effort, which deemed to make lions out of ordinary human material.

Notes

Both, the late A.K. Ramanujan, and Dilip Chitre are excellent poets writing in English, and have translated poetry from their mother tongue into English. Ramanujan has translated profusely from the Tamil and Kannada languages into English. I have used three of his books of translated poetry in my thesis. Their titles are : ***Speaking Of Shiva*** (shaivist poetry of the eleventh century Karnataka), ***Hymns For The Drowning*** (being Vaishnava poetry of Tamil Nadu around the eighth century), and the ***Poems Of Love And War*** (featuring fourteenth - fifteenth century verse which makes a departure from the earlier bhakti mode of writing into the sensuous songs sung by the temple devdasis). Dilip Chitre's much acclaimed work of translation is his collection of Tukaram's poetry called ***Says Tuka***. Tukaram was the most modern poetic genius of the seventeenth century Maharashtra.

- (ii) Ragas included in the ***Granth Sahib*** : Raga Tilang, Jaitshree, Dev-Gandhari, Gujn, Ramkali, Maru, Nat-Narayan, Gauri, Malhar, Kedar, Bhairav (what we call Bhairav now a days), Raga Basant, Saranga, Kannada, (in Punjabi it is spelt Kanra), Kalyan, Bibhas, Jaijawanti, Siri (i.e. Shri raga), Raga Majh, Bilawal, Dhanasri, Gauri Purbi, Suhi, Wadhansa, Sorath, and some more combination ragas with Gaun raga – raga Gauri-Purbi-Dipki, Gaun-Bairagan, Gauri-Guareri, Gauri-Majh, and raga Gauri-Mala.
- (iii) The Gayatri (or Savitri,) mantra is a sacred verse of the ***Rig Veda***. In translation it reads like this, "We meditate on the adorable glory of the sun; may he inspire our intelligence." There is a metre called Gayatri which has three feet of eight syllables each. The Gayatri mantra is in this metre. See page 299, ***The Principal Upanishads***, translated by S. Radhakrishnan.
- (iv) Dadu was the most celebrated disciple of Kabir. Born in Ahmedabad (1544 to 1603 A.D.), he died in village Narana in Rajasthan. He was regarded as a great poet. His language is a mix of Braj bhasa and Khari boli. He founded the

The heroic struggle for Indian Independence, the prophet-rebel-poets, and the reform movements that the soil threw up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, already had an example before them in history. Another model they had before them was in the Maratha king Shivaji. Shivaji from the very beginning, nourished strong spiritual leanings, and shared a deep relationship with the saint-poets Ramdas and Tukaram. He was known to go to the jungle and sit for days in meditation in the silence. The similarities between Shivaji and the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh, are very striking.

It must be noted that in both cases, of the Sikhs and the Marathas, the battle for the liberation of the soil and the liberation of the soul, went hand in hand. Both people were guided by their strong faith in the divine, communicated through the power of poetry and music whose presence ensured strong character-building, the heart of a lion, and a will to live morally and in harmony. This same spirit was to become the torch bearer in the nineteenth century. Whether it did or not, and why, we shall examine in the concluding chapter.

A Summary : This chapter analyses Nanak as a *Nirguna* poet closer in style to the incantatory and positive verse of the *Upanishads*, than to the Nath and Vaishnava tradition of verse writing. As a social activist and as a reformist however, his efforts to explode the limitation of religious framework and chart a new course for an active and unfettered creed of faith ironically led, a century later, to the formation of yet another religion. The chapter also examines the futuristic implications (both national and parochial), of Nanak's and Kabir's Sant ideology, since in them we have the finest confluence of Sufi and Bhakti mysticism. Nanak's deployment of Arabic and Persian terminology, his pantheistic Nature poetry and his honest response to the larger scheme of his socio-political reality have also been explored.

In a small way, the chapter also makes references to some obvious parallels the two Sants share with romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. In Kabir's and Nanak's work one also finds a manifestation of Kant's theory of the sublime art and sentiment which he has traced to the realm of spirituality. The Bhakti poets as we have examined so far, were not only great spiritualists and mystics, but they were also people who were intensely involved with the social, moral and religious fabric of their environment. The mystics of India reaffirm the Kantian thesis that great creative impulse always has its roots in spirituality and in a sense of tradition/ history*(11)

Parabrahma Sampradaya with a view to uniting different faiths in one bond of love and comradeship. The anthology of religious literatures of different sects was compiled under his instructions in the late sixteenth century. The **Granth Sahib** was compiled much later in 1604 A D , a year after Dadu's death.

- (v) "Nanak's diction is a blend of words from various languages – Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Sindhi, Khariboli, with, of course, a preponderance of Braj" (2870). From the aspect of language, his works can be divided into three parts (a) those more or less in the Apbhramsha style, (b) those in the Hindvi style and (c) those predominantly in pure Punjabi. "On the whole these compositions offer an instructive study in the development of the language in that period. It may be observed that in none of the three styles is there any consistent purity of linguistic form" (2871). Taken from the **Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature**, Sahitya Akademi.
- (vi) In 1603-1604 A.D. Guru Arjan had a tank dug in Amritsar, naming it Ramsar (the pool of Ram), which surrounds today, the Golden Temple – i.e. the **Hari-Mandir Sahib**. While the pool was being dug, the Guru had sat besides it and compiled the **Granth Sahib**
- (vii) "Popular scholarship regards Namdev, Ravidas, Kabir and Nanak as the main pillars of the Sant tradition. McLeod in his book ascribes to Namdev the status of the first great Sant and the second place he keeps for Ravidas. For although Ravidas follows Kabir, his work corresponds more closely to that of Namdev. Both Namdev and Ravidas belong to the earlier stage of the Sant movement, to the stage in which the links with Vaishnava Bhakti are more prominent and the evidence of influence from other sources much slighter. The evident external paraphernalia of worship has been discarded but the nature of devotion offered by these earlier Sants resembles the adoration of the bhagats, rather than the deeply mystical experience of Kabir and Nanak." (McLeod 154)
- (viii) The modern or royal Hindi was artificially extracted from Khari Boli by Lalluji Lal, about a century ago in the Fort William College at Calcutta. (**Guru Nanak's Life And Thought** 178)

- (ix) the *Chakor* is an Indian bird famous for its legendary love for the moon and the *Chatrik* is well known for hanging upside down in expectation of the first drops of rain
- (x) I do not wish to undermine in anyway the merit and the massive scale of the work that the late Manmohan Singh has accomplished. He has translated the entire ***Granth Sahib*** into modern Punjabi and English, which has been of immense assistance to my thesis work
- (xi) I refer to Kant here because I studied his ***Critique of Judgement*** and explored his concept of the 'sublime' for my M.Phil thesis titled , ***The Concept of the Sublime, in Longinus Burke and Kant***. Maharaja Sayajirao University. Baroda, 1984

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CHAPTER SIX

Indian Poetry in English :

The Problematic of Identity and Representation

The medieval Indian period, marked by the presence of the Delhi sultanate and the Moghul empire between the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, stood witness to a remarkable degree of cultural exchange between the Hindus and Muslims. It is well known that Indian classical music deeply influenced their musical traditions, and that Moghul architecture left a lasting impact upon the Hindu traditions of building. The two were poles apart in their religious and political ideologies, but the intense give and take among their poets and mystics – the Sants and the Sufis – in a land whose people were in the habit of singing their poetry, led to a period phenomenally rich in the creative arts. The political tension and struggle between the Moghul rulers and the Indian kings seems to have lent the phenomenon just that extra edge of a catalyst – previous chapters give us enough proof of this.

In this chapter we shall try to assess the place of mysticism and the impact of the Bhakti genre, upon Indian English poetry. But before that we will briefly examine the pre-Independence period which like the Moghul period, too was marked by political struggle and religious strife with a ruling foreign culture. The advent of English Education, the Indian's opening up to the world, and the Indian struggle for Independence (in the nineteenth and earlier half of the twentieth century), led to an intense struggle at the intellectual, spiritual and social levels. The period produced great heroes and men of genius. But did it produce great literature too? Did it give us a rich harvest in terms of Indian poetry in English? This, the chapter attempts to address.

As S.N.Hay in his essay on "**Modern India and Pakistan**" observes:

Just as the Muslim conquest had injected a fresh stream of religious thought into the veins of Hindu society, so the British conquest brought with it new views of the world, man and God.

Confronted with the message of Islam that all believers are equal in the sight of their Maker, religious leaders like Kabir and Nanak had come forth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to translate this teaching into traditional Hindu terms. Similarly in the nineteenth century a series of creative individuals emerged from the ranks of Hindu society to respond to the combined challenge of Christian religious ideas and of modern western, rationalist and utilitarian thought. (602)

But the extent to which it influenced and interfered with the Indian's individual and cultural sense of identity, was far more injurious than it was progressive (Please see the Appendix). For while the English program of education in India, alienated the native from his own culture, background and traditions, the mask it cultivated was that of being an agency that restored the Indian youth to its essential self, while actually it was reinserting him into the course of western civilisation. To illustrate this point I shall quote a sonnet by one of the earliest Indian English poets and educators, Henry Derozio:

Sonnet

Your hand is on the helm – guide on young men
 The bark that's **freighted with your country's doom**
 Your glories are but budding; they shall bloom
 Like fabled amaranths Elysian, when
 The shore is won, even now within your ken,
 And when your touch shall dissipate the gloom
 That long has made your country but a tomb,
 Or worse than a tomb, the priest's, the tyrant's den.
 Guide on young men; your course is well begun;
 Hearts that are tuned to holiest harmony
 With all that e'en in thought is good, must be
 Best formed for deeds like those which shall be done
 But you hereafter till your guerdon's won
 And that which now is hope becomes reality.
 (Hay 570)

It is interesting to note the contradiction in the sonnet above. On the one hand Derozio paints a gloomy picture of India's past as a "tyrant's den", and on the other hand he romanticises India for her former glories. In this respect.

Derozio foreshadows the mental conflict of later Indian nationalists as they sought to rid their country of the evils of the past and at the same time to bolster their claim to self rule by glorifying an ancient and honourable national heritage (Hay 569)

One suspects here the play of a carefully crafted policy by the British that chose to ignore the existence of regional Bhakti literatures, surcharged as they were with the spirit of freedom, fearlessness and equality. Instead the flashlight was turned towards the revival of Sanskrit and the ancient **Vedic** literatures to the exclusion of all else that was Indian, and (perhaps more) relevant to the Indian sense of continuity. The fractured persona that emerged out of such circumstances, and the state of unbounded euphoria among the Indian youth, for all that was English, contributed to the nineteenth century being a relatively barren period for the Indian tradition of soul-stirring poetry.

Had the young generation of English-educated Indian men and women been even familiar with their own mystic verse tradition; had a cohesive body of translated Bhakti Literature (or even Bhakti poetry in their regional language) been available to them, their fervent response towards British romantic poetry might have been tempered, more mature, and balanced in perspective. The same as had been the case with Tagore, who was obviously familiar with not only the Bhakti verse (his **Hundred Poems Of Kabir** is a translation of Kabir's poems into English), but also with the local tradition of Bengali poetry. Its sound patterns and the typical Bengali sensibility lend to Tagore's verse even in English translation, the allure of the mystic, the harmonious, and the elusively beautiful. The popular momentum that Tagore's **Gitanjali** (originally written in Bengali and translated later into English by Tagore himself) stirred in England around 1912 to 1914 A.D. is some measure of the strength of being original and being rooted in one's own tradition. If Bhakti poetry was

little known in the nineteenth century (despite having been fairly active until the seventeenth century), the onus must partly lie upon the lack of its proper representation and upon the absence of printing technology, which must have been further compounded by the lack of a national institutionalised system of education. But then India had never been a formal nation so to speak. The concept of a broad nationality among the regional Indian (bonded as he or she was by shared faiths, ethos, tradition and natural geographical features), just did not exist. The concept of Indian Nationality and that of the spread of English Education in India are discussed in some detail in the Appendix.

Having established in the Indian subcontinent (esp. among the Brahmins and the upper classes), the lack of a shared contemporary rhetoric, it is easier to understand the euphoria that followed the spread of English education. Its literature and sciences, fulfilled the imminent need among the youth for a more contemporary, egalitarian and progressive ideology. The ancient brahminized literary texts must have appeared too ancient and removed from reality, to the Indian youth, while the Bhakti literature which could have spoken more relevantly, was misrepresented by its eighteenth century upholders. The Bhakti schools had shrunk into ritualised / mechanical following within cloistered groups of continuing disciples (the *Kabir Panthies* for instance), and survived as an oral tradition passed on through songs from generation to generation, only in the poor man's hut.

From this point in time, one must also draw a distinction between religious and sectarian literature. The tradition of religious poetry according to history, was fairly strong in the regional languages, except that it lacked the originality of the former, and generally tended to be "repetitive and dull". The Indian fabric too had degenerated by and large, and had lapsed back into castism and all kinds of formalism. Besides Tyagaraja (1767 to 1847 A.D.) – the last of the great canon of Bhakti poets – who composed some good Bhakti poetry in Telugu in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, another source of qualitative spiritual poetry were the songs written in Bengali by the Brahmo Samajis. Their songs were in line with the tradition of Kabir, Dadu and

Nanak, with whom they shared their catholic spirit and the *Nirguna* concept of Godhead

The pre-independence period threw up a good number of mystics, saints, leaders and intellectuals, and was marked by intense change and revolution in the Indian society fighting for Independence. The great genius of this period – intelligent gifted men and women, were among the first Indians to acquire an admirable proficiency with the English language, literature and ideology. Usually such a combination of the individual genius and socio-political turbulence should have paid rich dividends in terms of great poetry, music and art, and further enriched the cultural tradition of India, which strangely did not happen. Except for a rare Tagore or an Aurobindo, there was no great poetry in English during this heroic period of phenomenal mass upsurge and political ferment. Large scale reform movements were a part of this period and so were the social saints, reformers and mystics like Ram Mohan Roy, Devendranath Tagore, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda and Gandhi. Most of them were well acquainted with the traditions of both the orient and the occident. Their main language of public expression was English (they shifted to the regional languages much later) and unlike the genius torch-bearers of the Bhakti movement, they hailed largely from the elite pocket of Indian society. They wrote excellent prose in English (not poetry), and delivered fiery, highly inspiring speeches (not the *kirtan* singing for them). Simultaneously they worked towards freeing their country, both from the British rule and from the social evils within the structure. They sang with Tagore: 'Into that heaven of freedom my Father, let my country awake....'

The modest corpus of Indian poetry written in English in its first phase between 1800 to 1857 A.D. involves the initiation of Indians to the English. Fed upon the European and English traditions of verse writing, the nineteenth century Indian poets endeavoured in varying degrees, to write like the British romantic poets in theme, sentiment, imagery, poetic-form and diction. At times Indian myth was also used as a subject for poetry. An example: the following poem – “**The Captive Ladie**” – by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. A

narrative poem published by the poet in 1849 A D , it shows the influence of the Romantics, particularly of Sir Walter Scott and Byron. The theme of the poem is the classic love story of Prithviraj and Samyukta and the way in which the heroic abduction of Samyukta by Prithviraj had far-reaching consequences in Indian history. The excerpt quoted below weaves round the subconscious fears of the queen, who fathoms in a dream, that the deity of destruction has withdrawn her protection from upon the kingdom of Prithviraj:

Methought there came a warrior-maid,
with blood-stain'd brow and sheathless blade,
Dark was her hue, as darkest cloud,
Which comes the Moon's fair face to shroud
And 'round her waist a hideous zone
Of hands with charnel lightnings shone,
And long the garland which she wore
Of heads all bath'd in streaming gore
How fierce the eyes of death unseal'd

.....
I shudder'd -- for, methought, she came,
With eyes of bright consuming flame.
'Daughter,' she said, -- 'farewell ! -- I go.'
'The time is come , -- it must be so.'
Leave thee and thine I will tonight,' --
Then vanished like a flash of light !
Again I dreamt -- I saw a pyre
Blaze high with fiercely gleaming fire:
And plung'd -- oh ! God ! into the flame

.....
I shnek'd -- but tell me why that start.

.....

(*Twenty-five Indian Poets in English* 79)

As Sisir Kumar Das observes in the ninth volume of Sahitya Akademi's **History of Indian Literature**, the trends of new poetry were visible in the

treatment of various themes -- worship of beauty in nature and in women, uninhibited flight of imagination, mysteries of creation and death, as well as situations of social protest and patriotism. It was not the theme which made the new poetry conspicuous but the attitude, the atmosphere, and intense subjectivity of the poems at large. Some of the most prominent Indian poets writing in English in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. A short survey of their poetic concerns follows.

Indian poetry in English is said to have begun with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who published *Poems* (1827 A.D.) and *The Fakeer of Jangheera* (1828 A.D.), a long poem. He not only wrote, but also taught English poetry at Hindu College, Calcutta. Born of a Portuguese father and an Indian mother, he was extremely westernised in outlook, his poetry however burns with nationalistic zeal and patriotic fervour. His verse was more like an Indian extension of the poetry of the English Romantics and Victorians. The following is a sonnet by Henry Derozio where the symbol 'harp' stands for the once rich and vibrant culture of India.

The Harp Of India

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
 Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain,
 Thy music once was sweet – who hears it now?
 Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?
 Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;
 Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou.
 Like ruined monument on desert plain:
 O! many a hand more worthy far than mine
 Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,
 And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine
 Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:
 Those hands are cold – but if thy notes divine
 May be by mortal wakened once again,
 Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

(*Twenty Five Indian Poets* 76)

Derozio died at the young age of twenty years. Among his noteworthy contemporaries were, Kashiprasad Ghose (1809 to 1873 A.D.), and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824 to 1873 A D), who was better known for his epoch making writing in Bengali

In its second phase. (1857 to 1920 A D.), the romantic strain of Indian English Poetry was charged with reformistic zeal. The socio-political awakening had generated a new self-confidence and authenticity in the verse of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, (both of whom were preoccupied with the romance and beauty of India), and of course Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. In his introduction to *Twenty Five Indian Poets In English*, K.S. Ramamurti, rightly says that the poets cannot be accused of being consciously imitative or derivative :

...the creative impulses of the English educated Indians, stirred as they were by the poetry to which they were exposed, drew their sustenance and momentum from the same tradition and they tried to create a new poetry out of that experience and inspiration. In other words they continued that tradition on the Indian soil even as many British and American poets did on their respective soils. (1)

Consequently, the above mentioned phenomenon led to two things: (a) While the British (including American), poetic traditions got a new lease of life on Indian soil; (b) for the Indian poetic tradition, it was the beginning of a phenomenal setback to begin resurfacing from which colonial mentality it has taken it more than a century.

The great Renaissance, which came in the nineteenth century in the wake of the Western impact on India, had awakened in its people a sense of nationality and made them conscious of the richness of their cultural heritage and its wealth of natural resources. Ironically, this awareness had arisen through the introduction of the English education which made it possible for great minds like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda to reassess

the country's cultural and spiritual values and articulate them in English. It was a period of immense emotional and mental stress as the country warmed up in its struggle for independence. The ideological ferment during this period hastened by the English language, produced besides the poets, a good number of eminent orators, novelists and pamphleteers like Surendranath Banerjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Srinivasa Shastri, Bankim Chandra, Romesh Chunder Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked as it was by intense struggle and reform, was also a period of immense violence, great sacrifices and deeds of courage. It should logically have given rise to a spate of inspirational and heroic poetry; both in the regional languages and in the English which was keeping euphoric rhythm with the ongoing British poetic traditions (of Romanticism and Victorianism) and was quite detached from the poetic traditions of its own soil. A Basavanna, a Narasimha Mehta, a Kabir, or a Nanak would have risen to the occasion and written inspiring verse that could have mingled with the men and women on the streets, warmed their hearts, lifted their spirits, and earned its worth as national literature.

But the mode of effective communication adopted by Indian Nationalists was prose, (not poetry), both spoken and printed. Later of course, as the movement spread to the masses, the English idiom had to be abandoned in favour of Hindi and other region specific dialects. Even Shri Ramakrishna (1836 –1886 A.D.), who is regarded as being in the direct line of mystics like Kabir and Nanak, has left us some excellent literature in English prose. For instance, when referring to the time of joyous illumination which followed the experience of enlightenment, he writes :

What a state it was ! The slightest cause aroused in me the thought of the divine ideal. One day I went to the Zoological Garden in Calcutta. I desired especially to see the lion, but when I beheld him, I lost all sense-consciousness and went into *Samadhi*. Those who were with me wished to show me the other animals, but I replied, "I saw everything when I saw the king of beasts. Take me home." The

strength of the lion had aroused in me the consciousness of the omnipotence of God and had lifted me above the world of phenomena. (*Sources of Indian Tradition* 639)

We can say that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the departure of mainstream literature from the Indian tradition, as new forms (prose and criticism) and ideologies were absorbed and adopted under the Western impact. Even the sentiment of aggressive nationalism was an imported concept. That it proved beneficial to the country, is a matter of good fortune.

Against this background, when we look back at the corpus of English poetry written by Indians, we see it in its infant stage, as a bright-eyed child looking up at its newly acquired foster parents, and all eagerness to ape their ways of conduct and speech. The poets considered themselves a part of the British tradition (a distortion of personal and national identity) and did not think that they were capable of creating a regular tradition of their own or creating poetry of merit that would rank them with the British masters. Their poetry was predominantly nostalgic and often its romanticism bordered on sentimentality. Quoted below are two comments by two different critics, on the profuse emotionalism in Indian English poetry of the nineteenth century:

Hero-worshipping the British poets and piously imitating their form and meter, even at times their themes and moods, the Indo-Anglican poets of the nineteenth century recollected their emotions almost in futility. (Syed Amanuddin 425)

This all-embracing sentimentality generally stood in the way of wit, humour, and satire, only allowing one form to succeed, viz. that which enabled the writer to express his dissatisfaction without much offence to the state or society. (D. P. Mukherji 121)

Mention must be made of two fine women poets – Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu – who wrote excellent romantic verse in English, celebrating the beauty

and rhythm of the Indian landscape, Indian customs and legends. Both of them had travelled abroad, and were equally well exposed to their own culture Toru Dutt, (1856 to 1876 A.D.), belonged to a wealthy family which was also highly cultured and encouraged higher education Toru's father was a Christian convert, while her mother continued to be a chaste Hindu. The following first two stanzas from her much celebrated poem "**Our Casuarina Tree**". display the poet's sensibility, depth, and facility with the English language and form. They also indicate the poet's potential mystic leanings which, as the poem progresses, are somewhat submerged by obvious allusions to the Romantics

Like a huge Python, winding round and round
 The rugged trunk, indented deep with scars
 Up to its very summit near the stars,
 A creeper climbs, in whose embraces bound
 No other tree could live. But gallantly
 The giant wears the scarf, and flowers are hung
 In crimson clusters all the boughs among...

.....
 A gray baboon sits statue-like alone
 Watching the sunrise, while on lower boughs
 His puny offspring leap and play;
 And far and near Kokilas hail the day;
 And to their pastures wend our sleepy cows
 And in the shadow, on the broad tank cast
 By that hoar tree, so beautiful and vast,
 The water lillies spring, like snow enmeshed.. .

(**Twenty Five Poets** 84)

After a brilliant meteoric career in poetry. Toru died at the young age of twenty one. Sarojini Naidu (1879 to 1849 A.D), who was born three years after Toru's death; to progressive minded Brahmin parents, grew up to be known as the 'dreamy eyed mystic child of India'. Her lyrical art reveals the influence of both British romanticism and Persian and Urdu verse traditions

with their characteristic opulence. Poems like, "**Palanquin Bearers**," "**Bangle Sellers**," "**Flute Player Of Brindavan**," and "**Song Of Radha The Milkmaid**," are among her better known poems with an Indian theme. She is quite Mira-like in her sense of devotion, in the following poem addressed to Lord Krishna

Song Of Radha, The Milkmaid

I carried my curds to the Mathura fair .
How softly the heifers were lowing .

I wanted to cry, "Who will buy
These curds that are white as the clouds in the sky
When the breezes of Shravan were blowing?
But my heart was so full of your beauty, Beloved
They laughed as I cried without knowing
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!

How softly the river was flowing.

I carried my pots to the Mathura tide...
How gaily the rowers were rowing! ...
My Comrades called, "Ho! Let us dance, let us sing
And wear saffron garments to welcome the spring.

.....
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda!

How gaily the river was flowing!

I carried my pots to the Mathura shrine. .
How brightly the torches were glowing! ..

I folded my hands at the alter to pray
 "O shining ones guard us by night and by day"
 And loudly the conch shells were blowing.
 But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved.
 They were worth when I cried without knowing.

Govinda! Govinda!
 Govinda! Govinda!

How brightly the river was flowing!
 (*Commonwealth Poetry* 18 -19)

Sarojini Naidu was the most musical of the nineteenth century poets, and although younger to both Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, she won recognition in England much earlier. Her verse however, tends to lapse at times into sentimentalism and abstraction. As Sisir Kumar Das comments: Her poetry gave neither any particular direction to the Indian poetry in English or any other language, nor did she articulate any particular manifesto of poetry challenging the existing tradition. Sri Aurobindo on the other hand thought and wrote extensively on Indian poetry..(he saw).. .. very clearly, the relationship between the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, aesthetic, intellectual tradition and environment which it creates for him. (Vol. IX 184)

The sense of inadequacy, of having lost something in Indian poetry would come much later. At this stage of its genesis, the Indian English poet was in a mood to celebrate upon his new acquisition. Since a majority of the poets exposed to an English education/ culture, hailed from the privileged background; there is very little reference in their poetry, to the reality of the Indian, lower down the rung. As D.P. Mukherji, writing in 1942 A.D. observes:

The reformist zeal in literature had certain limitations, however. The lower castes were not quite inside the pale of observation; and the social inequality was not further analyzed into its essentials." (123)

However, there is an immense gap between the work of talented poets who wrote with a superficial grounding in Indian culture, and those poets (like Aurobindo and Tagore), who were writing in (or translating into) English and yet were deeply grounded in their cultural and literary heritage.

The giant figures of Sri Aurobindo (1872 to 1950 A.D), and Rabindranath Tagore (1861 to 1941 A.D), loom large upon this period of the Indian Renaissance. What we find in Aurobindo and Tagore is an unfractured poetic dialogue : an exception to the general trend of the period. Here are poets who have drunk from the deep wells of tradition and tasted the waters of foreign influence and emerged even richer from the churning. Theirs is a poetry inspired by the instinct for the divine, the spirit mystical. Compare (though it may sound ludicrous), the following sonnets: **"The Bliss of Brahman,"** by Aurobindo with the brilliant sonnet, **"To India -- My Native Land,"** by Derozio. The motive behind this juxtaposition is only to place before the reader the stark contrast in terms of depth and quality which the sense of history (its presence or lack in a poet), can effect. Considering that the poets were writing in a language that had had no history upon their soil, their verse was impressive, but the fact that they hailed from a culture that boasted of an exceptionally great poetic tradition, (both in Sanskrit and in the regional languages), their end product was disappointing:

To India -- My Native Land

My country ! in the day of glory past
 A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
 And worshipped as a deity thou wast.
 Where is that glory, where that reverence now ?
 The eagle pinion is chained down at last,
 And groveling in the lowly dust art thou:
 Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee
 Save the sad story of thy misery!
 Well — let me dive into the depths of time,
 And bring from out the ages that have rolled
 A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime,

Which human eye may never more behold;
 And let the guerdon of my labor be
 My fallen country! one kind wish from thee! (Hay 571)

Derozio's sonnet is technically brilliant while spiritually it is weighed down by decay and gloom. It displays the typical "amnesia" and distorted vision of the Indian towards his/ her own history. And therefore as an Indian poem has little to contribute to Indian poetry, except for its sentimental nostalgia. Aurobindo's sonnet on the other hand brims with the mystic wealth of its poetic legacy to which the poet adds the advantage of his facility with English language and literature. As a result we discover with Aurobindo, a fresh perspective to the tradition of Indian mystic poetry written in the English language, with Miltonic or Romantic undertones and technique flowing into the swift flowing waters of the Indian poetic tradition. The following sonnet, "**The Bliss of Brahman**" is an example.

I am swallowed in a foam-white sea of bliss,
 I am a curving wave of God's delight.
 A shapeless flow of happy passionate light,
 A whirlpool of the streams of Paradise.
 I am a cup of His felicities,
 A thunderblast of His golden ecstasy's night,
 A fire of joy upon creation's height;
 I am His rapture's wonderful abyss.

I am drunken with the glory of the Lord
 I am vanquished by the beauty of the Unborn;
 I have looked, alive, upon the Eternal's face.

My mind is cloven by His radiant sword,
 My heart by His beatific torch is torn,
 My life is a meteor-dust of His flaming Grace.
 (*Sri Aurobindo : Collected Poems* 158)

The above sonnet was written in the later part of Aurobindo's life. It reflects the richness of his inner life. Even though Aurobindo wrote with India in his bones, he was also writing from the experience of a long and intense exposure to the English and European classics, which is obvious in the way he uses the sonnet form. Aurobindo is too great a phenomenon to be dealt with any justice in this brief summing up of a thesis. The attempt must however be made, in order to substantiate the thesis that a poetics well grounded in its cultural and spiritual roots, is bound to produce a more qualitative and distinguished verse.

Sri Aurobindo's vast volume of all kinds of verse : lyrical, narrative, philosophical and epic, produced during a poetic career spanning over sixty years, has great qualitative variations, as the poet evolved in his lifetime from a patriot to poet, to yogi, and seer. He wrote two epic poems – *Illion*, and *Savitri* – of which, the later is not only better, but among his best work of poetry. Its subject is based upon a legend from the *Mahabharata*. Written in blank verse, it is divided into twelve books. Its diction and imagery reveal the influence of Miltonic and Romantic models. An epic of the soul and the oversoul, *Savitri* is a distillation of Aurobindo's philosophy of internal yoga, according to which " God must be born on earth and be a Man / that Man being human may grow even as God.." In contrast, the theme of *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore's finest achievement in English verse is, devotion and its motto, that "I am here to sing thee songs " Unlike Aurobindo, who withdrew into periods of complete seclusion in his life, Tagore does not see renunciation as the path to deliverance. For him the world, itself is a beautiful creation of God, it is, one source of reaching Him.

Born to affluent parents in Calcutta in 1872 A.D., Aurobindo Ghose, at the tender age of seven, was sent to England to have a purely western education. While in England, he experienced the beginnings of his spiritual life, which led him to writing poetry. At the age of twenty one, when he returned to India, he was already an excellent poet who wrote like a Romantic, but with obvious classical echoes and a Miltonic temperament. In the following stanza for instance, the European and Eastern myths are blended together in a strange

meeting across the globe : "Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati / Has called to regions of eternal snow/ And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,/ Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow " ("Envoi" from *Songs to Myrtilla*, poems written around the time the young poet left England for home, i.e India.)

Aurobindo's later poetry, written from 1934 A.D onwards, reveals a radical shift in sensibility and a striking control of technique, "A deep spiritual calm no touch can sway/ Upholds the mystery of the Passion-play." As Sisirkumar Ghose comments in his essay "**Sri Aurobindo: A Poet as Seer**": "In his later poems, especially the inner epic **Savitri**, Sri Aurobindo's role as a pathfinder, a traveller between summit and abyss, stands revealed beyond cavil or question." In **Savitri**, he repeatedly exhorts mankind to exceed itself and realise the beauty of their future:

O force-compelled, fate-driven earth-born race,
O petty adventurers in an infinite world
 And prisoners of a dwarf humanity,
 How long will you tread the circling tracks of mind
 Around your little self and petty things?
 (Nadkarni, M. **Savitri : A Brief Introduction** 10)

The following lines from a letter he wrote to 'Mother'* give us some insight into his attitude towards poetry especially towards **Savitri**, which was for him a mirror that reflected his inner levels of yogic experience and transformation:

I used **Savitri** as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level; each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level In fact, **Savitri** has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.
 (Nadkarni, M. 11)

*[Mirra Blanch Rachel Alfassa, the extraordinarily spiritually gifted French lady who joined Aurobindo in 1920 A.D. to start the Pondichery Ashram.]

Indian poetry (and not merely Indian English poetry,) will remain indebted to the genius of Aurobindo. For he not only enhanced and carried further the great tradition of Indian poetry, he opened up not just for Indian poetics but for world literature as well. new possibilities in poetic utterance. As Sisirkumar Ghose rightly puts it.

Poetry today is mostly the poetry of crisis – now and then the crisis of poetry no less ! But integration is from within and depends upon a change of consciousness. This is where a good many of our poets and thinkers fail. Placed by their side Sri Aurobindo who speaks almost a new tongue – an Orphic voice of such sanity and serenity, of incontestable inwardness and maturity..
(44)

A similar poise, integrated character, and depth of vision marked the persona of another Bengali poet – Rabindranath Tagore, who was older to Aurobindo by eleven years. Tagore was born in a family where the atmosphere was charged with deep religious feelings and yet was free from adherence to formalistic ritual. It was an illustrious family that had been at the forefront of both commercial and intellectual activities, a family steeped deeply in the Upanishadic and Islamic traditions of India while it welcomed Western education and Western life style and strove to achieve a synthesis between the two. The roots of Tagore's poetic capacity to combine tradition with new technique must lie here. Added to this , young Tagore's experience as the manager of his father's estate, brought him in direct contact with nature and man in rural Bengal, which poured out through his poetry (often set to music), and struck a chord at the deepest levels of the collective consciousness of the people of Bengal.

Tagore was a bilingual poet. Most of his poems were written in Bengali , which he later translated into English. His translations of the songs in ***Gitanjali*** were received rapturously in London and fetched him the Nobel

Prize for literature , in 1913 A D He was the first Indian to make such a mark, and receive such uninhibited adoration from the English people, (even though it was retracted later due to various reasons)

What was it in Tagore and Aurobindo that fetched them such international acclaim and attention as poets, visionary, seer; and what is it that has kept their work alive for posterity? Besides their individual genius, it was their strong rootedness in the Indian poetic conscious. their courage to live by their convictions and their earnest life-long dialogue with mysticism/ spirituality. Tagore was greatly influenced by the medieval poets of India, in particular by Kabir, whose poems he has translated (under the title. ***Hundred Poems Of Kabir***), so sympathetically, that at times the poet and the translator seem to merge. Octavio Paz the Spanish poet ambassador to India, perceives it differently According to Paz, "Tagore translated Kabir's poems because he saw in them the failed promise of what India could have become" (43) The following song which is from Tagore's volume of mystic verse, the ***Gitanjali*** 1949 A.D., begins like many a doha of Kabir's, with mockery and questioning:

Leave this chanting and singing and
telling of beads! Whom dost thou
worship in this lonely dark corner of a
temple with doors all shut? Open
thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
He is there where the tiller is tilling
the hard ground and where the path
maker is breaking stones. He is with
them in sun and in shower, and his
garment is covered with dust. Put off
thy holy mantle and even like him come
down on the dusty soil!
Deliverance ? Where is this deliverance
to be found? Our master himself
has joyfully taken upon him the bonds
of creation. he is bound with us all for ever.

Come out of thy meditations and
 leave aside thy flowers and incense!
 What harm is there if thy clothes
 become tattered and stained? Meet
 him and stand by him in toil and in
 sweat of thy brow. (Macmillan Edition 8-9)

Tagore's was a vagabond spirit, a pantheist who sought poetry and the mystic spirit on the waters of the Padma river which he traversed in his boat many a time listening to the strain of a flute, watching the dust clouds of cattle returning home, the blowing of conch shells, the pain of the parched earth, and the march of dark clouds bringing heavy rain in the month of July. Commenting upon the delicate balance of harmonies in Tagore's verse, W.B. Yeats rightly says that they are:

..the work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes – A tradition where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. ('Introduction' *Gitanjali* xiii-xiv)

Tagore's poetry has prominent tones of (a) the regional Bengal, (b) the continuing tradition of Bhakti poetry with its preoccupations with nature, love and God, (c) the spirit of the wandering Fakir, and (d) a heightened sense of aesthetics refined further by his exposure to the greatest and finest in world literature. According to William Radice, in his introduction to the 1985 Penguin edition of Tagore's *Selected Poems*, his writings do not convey "the full realisation or enlightenment of a mystic or seer", rather they display, a passionate human yearning – "a sense of the ideal always being beyond reach". On the other hand, in Aurobindo's verse, we see the full realisation of a poet as seer, a recluse who unravels through poetry, the itinerary of his travels in the gyre of orphic experience. In this respect (in his approach to divinity), he is more like the Nath yogis and rishis dwelling in the Himalayas,

in solitary existence, and composing poetry that deals almost exclusively with states of being, and subtle ranges of ungraspable experience. His genius , as a result has been under-rated and misjudged by some, during his lifetime.

The following comment of Sisirkumar Ghose holds relevance not only to Aurobindo, but is also true of Mira, Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram, Akho Bhagat, and other mystic poets belonging to the pantheon of Indian devotional poetry. Dr. Ghose says-

To presume that visionary writers have a weak hold on life is part of the order of ideas that has to be left aside if we are to enter the world of Aurobindian poetry. For it deals with, as it depends upon, experiences, 'not very much frequented by common readers of poetry'. An openness to these experiences and some knowledge of the conditions of their fit expression would seem to be part of the reader's equipment..

(**Mysticism: Views and Review 44**)

Thus we arrive upon two conclusions that should guide the efforts of our contemporary Indian poets writing in English. They are. Firstly, however out of fashion spirituality might be in today's world of rationale , intellect, and technical perfection, the bottom line to producing great literature and great works of art is the inner maturity and spiritual depth of an individual genius. It was this factor of an inbred spirituality, that gave Indian poetry that extra edge, that rainbow leap to levels that are transcendental and superhuman. And secondly, a poet should be familiar with not only his/ her regional and national tradition, but also with his/ her contemporary reality and forms of expression (both urban and rural), to fuse and experiment with which should be their constant effort. The fact that the Bhakti sentiment found fertile ground in Aurobindo who wrote in the English language goes to prove that the English language can be Indianized, that it could be stretched and manoeuvred to suitably project the rhythms of Indian life, culture, seasons, symbols and its essential mindset.

The Gandhian era of poetry in English (1920 to 1947 A.D.), was strangely silent. Despite tremendous national upheaval on the socio-political and

economic fronts, the crisis and plunder of Partition, and the first World War. Unlike Indian poetry in the regional languages, there is hardly any response through poetry in English. I shall substantiate this argument by illustrating in English translation, a poem originally written in Hindi by the poet Kumar Vikal

A Poem to Her Pain, written shortly after the Independence, refers to the Partition experience, the emotionally ravaged existence of people in refugee camps, longing for the small basic comforts and the warmth of their homes and relationships. To return to that "courtyard with two trees", and that "little dream-house"

A Poem to her Pain

First they inscribed on my back
with red hot irons
in the language of fire
the name of a country
that cannot be found
on any map of the world.

The second time they came
in the dark of the curfew
beating the army drums and
trampled over my body.. .

The third time I am in a refugee camp.
What have I come here to look for . .
My body or my home
in the courtyard of which
there were two young trees
bearing the fruits of dreams
and a lovely little sparrow named Pinky
frisked around chirping dreams.

In refugee camps
there are no dream-houses

just sobbing ruins,
 charred trees, clipped wings of sparrows and the
 shriek of a half-crazed woman 'that'
 tears the darkness of the curfew
 to merge with the tune
 of the army bands

I do not want any country
 no holy place,
 no religious space
 Just give me back
 my tiny little dream-house
 made on a fragment of this sprawling earth.

(**An Anthology of Modern Hindi Poetry** 142)

Kumar Vikal's poem speaks of a shared experience, it holds up a mirror to the pain of partition and the futility of the exercise when it comes to the basics of human existence. The poem in other words, appeals to the larger Indian scene of experience and shared emotional history. Poetry written in English in India however does not enjoy such popular status, having largely disconnected itself from both, its literary and socio-political realities. As Bruce King (quoted by K.S. Ramamurti in *Twenty-five Indian Poets in English*), points out :

Indian poetry as it gained recognition, seems to have moved away from political culture towards, "other newly emerging modern arts such as painting, drama, film and cultural journalism, which appeal to the educated affluent professional classes of modern urban India.

(136)

The voices that emerge in the post independence period, produce poetry of an intellectual variety – a poetry which lacks in varying degrees, both soul and life. It is radical and more relevant in so far as it diverges from the earlier hypnotic stance of romance and idealism. It is characterised by a merciless sense of self-sufficiency, rigorous questioning, sophisticated irony and

laconic humour , punctuated with the modern man's sense of disillusionment , inertia, and his/her search in the general myopic blindness.

In the chaos of verse that followed , there were poets like Dom Moraes, P.Lal, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki Daruwala, Adil Jussawala, Gieve Patel, Kamla Das, Shiv K Kumar, Arvind Mehrotra and Jayanta Mahapatra. And more recently, Eunice De Souza, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth, Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt, Makrand Paranjape, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Jeet Thayil, and Vijay Nambisan, to name a few. As Dr G.N. Devy observes in *In Another Tongue*:

The post-Aurobindo period in poetry in English is certainly a problematic one. Whereas after the British left India the standard of English has declined and its status as an 'Indian' language has been questioned repeatedly, creative writing has experienced something like a 'poetry- explosion'. ...[which factor has]... inevitably influenced the quality of poetry in an adverse manner. and yet there is some distinguished poetry in English today. Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Parthasarthy, Kolatkar and Mahapatra are among those whose work compares well with that of authors writing in Indian languages, on the one hand, and of other Commonwealth poets, on the other hand. In style, diction and aesthetics there is a world of difference between pre-Aurobindo and post-Aurobindo poets; but, increasingly, the experience pattern discernible in both groups is essentially the same. (76)

The "experience pattern" of contemporary Indian English poetry largely circles around the personal experiences and emotional tendencies of the poet. It is a rare poet or poem that attempts to look beyond, at a larger Indian reality: to hobnob with the soul of the soil and to grow from within it. (This is the reason, why Ezekiel's poem, **"Night of the Scorpion"** enjoys such popular appeal even, with casual Indian readers of English poetry). We see it happening , in varying degrees, in the poetry of Aurobindo, Tagore and more recent poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre and Imtiaz Dharker. However, as a general rule, Indian poetry in English is unable to surge to that level of poetry

where poetic intelligence fuses with intuition; represents the spiritual tenor of a whole culture, and resonates with the outlook, depth and variety of its living metaphor and image. Comparatively much bolder work and experimentation with linguistic expression (closer to the Indian patterns of sound) has been conducted by Indian novelists writing in English. Fiction writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have created their own English idiom which is unmistakably Indian in its import, and draws sustenance from the Indian reality. Poetry in English on the other hand, continues to be the occupation of an extremely limited urban population. It speaks to a limited audience and is self generating. The following poem – one in a series of poems on **Modern English Poets I- V** by Rukmini Bhaya Nair, is a sample:

For Kamala Das

You have an excellent memory, forgetting
Only the incidents imagination cannot use.

Little sparrowy poets fluttering in and out,
And the girls, weak and colourless window-
Birds, vanishing when you clapt your wings,
Sleek pigeon, cooing from your Cuffe Parade
Heights, those afternoons the predators came,
Attracted by the pheromone scent of your poems.

Because I remember facts, I am a chronicler,
There is no poetry in what I have to tell you.
Your poems smelt like the sea at low-tide, like
Guano, the world after summer rain, shaming your
Loud Posters, the tantrums you set up, carpeting
The tawdry salon floor, a smoke-edged forest fire. (24)

Indian English poetry thus far has enjoyed an element of elitism and unlike the Bhakti poets (who spoke from among their own people), it has maintained a distance from the rigours of the dust and sweat of life. For it is a rare

sweeper or low paid worker who can understand English or identify with the limited subject and sophistication of English poetry. Bhakti poetry on the other hand, was an egalitarian literature of change, spanning through the entire gamut of social classes, it enjoyed large audience. Its poets hailing from a cross section of Indian society, could be a weaver or a cobbler by profession, or even a Brahmin or a king. They wrote and sang their poetry from the bone, marrow and flesh of Indian life. Poetry, more than popular theatre, was the main literary form of cultural expression in medieval India.

A similar intimacy with the larger reality is lacking in poetry in English, and although a change in its thematic scope has begun to appear, the process is limited and erratic. Even today, for an English literature student beginning to compose poetry, the urge to write like his/ her western models, and get published in foreign journals remains uppermost. The effort however is counter productive. For an imitation will always remain an imitation however brilliantly it tries to copy. Contemporary Regional and Dalit literatures on the other hand, share a much better relation with their tradition rooted in rural and folk cultures. The following poem by Kailash Vajpayee (translated by the poet himself from Hindi), alludes to a continuing dialogue with Bhakti. The poem begins with references to the untapped resources of the "mute river" within. If the "floodgates" of that river – that "Hum of the Cosmos" – were "thrown open", "A genesis would occur." The poem also makes allusions to the blue-skinned and flute-playing shepherd-god, Krishna. In the tradition of Surdas and Mira, Vajpayee writing in the late twentieth century, portrays Krishna as he dances upon the shores of the spirit, he appeals, "Unlock this womb / Of every harmony!" :

Thou art That
Within you is locked
A mute river
 Of fragrance and colour.

Were you to learn
 The art of blossoming

The drought in the garden
Would suffer a rout

A new genesis would occur
Were you to **throw open**
The floodgates.

Hear me –
Your music is diffused
Like the scattered rhymeless
Hum of the Cosmos

You are a raw reed of bamboos
Were your body fashioned
Into a flute,
Were harmonic brands
Seared into your flesh,
Were the bluest lips
Pressed against you,

The sleeping seeds within
Would banish the wastelands
With a tangle of saplings

Listen –
For **you can be the grove**
Where he dances,
In you is trapped
A firmament.

Unlock this womb
Of every harmony!
(*An Anthology of Modern Hindi Poetry* 125-126)
(All emphasis mine.)

A similar sense of being in a continuous, organic relationship with one's cultural roots is found in both the contemporary Dalit and regional literatures. However, in the absence of systematic and aggressive translation activity (by the English literature academics), they continue to circulate in a small way, beneath the blanket of *Desi* (meaning native) literature. One wonders if one should call it regional literature or marginalised literature?

The mainstream trend on the other hand, favours the progressive English language and its body of literature in English – which grossly misrepresents the canon of Indian literature. By no means am I referring here to its poetic standards – which in fact are good. My issue here is with the thematic and representative value of Indian English poetry, keeping in mind its narcissistic subjects, its highbrow attitudes and ideological preoccupations. It also lacks the initiative to incorporate and experiment with Indian meters, rhythms and poetic form. Secondly, unless English is actively used to translate from regional literature and thus create a pan-Indian literary consciousness, Indian literature in English will continue to undermine and misrepresent the picture of Indian creative writing, not only to the world, but to itself as well. As the result of an essentially selective and urban environment, Indian English poetry has tended to regard British and American poets as its role models. Consequently its approach towards its own literature in the regional languages (and towards regional language itself), has been typically colonial and high handed. Indian English poetry has thus alienated itself by fabricating for itself an urban reality, distanced from the cultural and emotional ethos of the uncultivated native culture of India. It has, by and large, restricted itself to classroom scrutiny, select poetry readings and sophisticated drawing room banter. It is unfit as a document of representative and cultural value, and unfit as a piece of National literature. To quote Dr. Devy, once again:

The language of literature, anywhere in the world and in any given period, draws its life from the language outside literature, from the language in ordinary use in the business of life. The English

language in India lacks some of the vital dimensions which would make it a fully living language, from which the writers can draw sustenance. In the case of the post-colonial Indian English writers, fiction precedes language. It is as if these writers are trying to create an Indian English through their fictions rather than creating fiction out of a living Indian English (116)

English language may be at the centre of power propagating circles but poetry in English has largely been in the periphery, being more of a distant, complacent onlooker, churning out poetry that rarely looks beyond its narcissistic preoccupations with, what Dr. Devy calls, their "playfulness" and "fiction-making", their obsessive love affair with the intellectual and progressive outlook of urban living

I shall close this chapter on a positive note, with two randomly selected poems, by two Indian English poets -- Jayanta Mahapatra, and Imtiaz Dharker. The poems have been selected at random, and they represent in varying degrees, the better kind of verse being written today in English. The poems also mirror the kind of relationships and concerns the poets share with their environment

Lost

Here I have learnt to recognise you
at a distance,
the evenings heavy,
the half-light wandering round the room .

I've wanted to know what lulling silence
can bloom in my hands,
what pain and pleasure your mind can wear
through the intrigues at my fingertips.

I watch your body ease off the seasons
stretched out on the stone of my breath,

going nowhere.

My hands move on
 Inside the lines of my moving palms,
 is it time being sent back to somewhere far behind
 on the edge of dream?
 Is it that
 which quietly shuts my eyes?

And outside my hands, where
 your body keeps shrinking in space,
 the first faith of some child goes wrong
 like some defect in a mechanical toy;
 yet what does it lead to?
 To what fateful encounter?

Like a misplaced watch, this half-light.
 Where was I when I lost it?

(Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets 63-64)

The poem “**Lost**” by Jayanta Mahapatra, explores existential concerns. Expressions like “eas(ing) off the seasons”, “some defect in a mechanical toy”, “fateful encounter” and Mahapatra’s reference to “this half-light” and “Where was I when I lost it?”, convey through their ambivalence. And one wonders if that ‘half light’ is symbolic of the poet’s spiritual innocence lost somewhere as the seasons of life eased off? The poet however finds succor in love and relationships as a buffer against the uncertainties of life. In contrast, the Indian mystics who were used to transcending material reality, would have sought solace in a dyadic relationship with the divine and looked for love within. This is one major difference between contemporary Indian English poetry and medieval mystic verse. In a limited way, contemporary English poetry does sometimes echo the aesthetics and sensibilities of our poetic tradition, through the symbols a poet uses and in the way he or she responds to their environment. Mahapatra’s preoccupation with ‘silence’ is

one example. Ironically this very “silence” in modern poetry also provides a paradox to the energy, music and life which fill the metaphoric regions of Bhakti poetry. Imtiaz Dharker’s poem **“The Mark”** brings us somewhere close to it. Its imagery is exuberant — almost pantheistic in its attitude, and its vision that of a mystic. The reference here is to the deep sense of universal motherhood that contains within it the entire circle of regeneration and life. From the plural the poem travels towards the singular and personal spaces

The Mark

I contain them all.

“The churning blood and heartbeats,
countless souls of men, small animals,
snakes, ants, birds, trees

They swarm inside me
insistent as a storm of bees,
clatter across my thoughts,
dragging their future with them
and their million deaths,
setting down their histories
on the threshold of my tolerance,
laying voice on voice,
familiar as my own,
demanding I think well of them,
begging to come home.
Perhaps I invited this.
I have a memory of a small
white card, stamped with hope;
or was it a woman’s body
transparent as a veil
that fell away to reveal
a child curled up,
contained within itself? (54)

"The Mark" belongs to an exclusive category of contemporary English poetry which leans towards the pantheistic and the mystic. Such type of writing has begun to occasionally smatter the poetic scene of Indian English poetry, recently. This fact offers us hope of a poetic comeback to the sources of the great Indian tradition --- hope that the modern poetic sensibility and the mystic will reinterpret each other, and work towards taking Indian poetry in English towards newer and greater horizons to which Tagore and Aurobindo have alluded through their poetry.

So far with this chapter we have explored the effects of English education upon the Indian's psyche and changed worldview. (The more technical details of the spread of English education and its reception by different segments of the country, have been taken up in the Appendix). One of the consequences of the colonial rule was the fracture it caused in the Indian sense of history and continuing traditions of the arts. The complexity of its effects is most apparent in the corpus of Indian poetry that came to be written in English (in the nineteenth century), and went on to establish itself as a genre ridden with the crisis of identity and representation. In the last two centuries, Indian English poetry has travelled towards a sense of complacent self-sufficiency. It creates with an urban set of culture, concept and symbols, and is laced with the concerns and mentality of the "progressive" metropolis. As a result it fails to represent, rather it misrepresents the larger Indian reality. This issue the chapter has examined. It began with a brief survey of poetry written in the nineteenth century and went on to discuss in some detail, the early twentieth-century poets: Tagore and Aurobindo, who sustained their links with the mystic tradition of Indian poetry-writing, produced great poetry of lasting worth, and therefore continue, to be read and visited by Indian audiences ranging across a larger cross section of society.



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CONCLUSION

Indian poetry until the sixteenth century, was highly representative and was popularly sung or chanted. It played an intensely radical role in the medieval Indian society. But after the coming of the English language and literature in the nineteenth century, it began to distance itself from the larger socio-cultural concerns, and to create for itself, a personal idiom more occupied with emulating the English poets in their creation of beauty, romantic sentiment and in fetishising the Indian nation. This in general was the face of Indian English poetry in its pre-Independence phase, with the exception of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, who wrote in line with the mystic tradition of Indian poetry, looming large upon the scene.

In its post-independence phase, in the twentieth century, Indian English poetry departs from its earlier romantic and classical leanings, to become more self-questioning, at times cynical, witty, and in its vision, more metropolitan. It is far more sophisticated and complex as we have discussed in chapter six. It shows considerable maturity and depth, but tends to become limited and self-generating in its predominant preoccupations with the urban and metropolitan India. In so far as it, (a) represents only a part of Indian reality, and (b) is largely detached from contemporary art forms of the folk and regional cultures, it performs an immense disservice to itself and to the once glorious tradition of Indian poetry. It misrepresents, and fails to communicate. But before we go any further into that, we must first take a look at what it is we find in the continuous tradition of Indian poetry. From that, the answers should emerge.

The Indian poetic tradition beginning from the *Upanishads* until the sixteenth century Bhakti poetry, is characterised by a shared aesthetic temperament, a continuous system of semiotics, a shared response to

seasons, landscape and topography and the common pool of religious ideology, faith and mythology, from which it draws its colour image thought, form, etc. Thus the semiotics of the collective poetic conscious of the Indian is symbolised by metaphors of the following variety the inverted thousand-petaled lotus dripping elixir and the sky – as supra-conscious states, allusions to the bumble bee hovering amongst fragrant flowers (the “white jasmine” in Nammalvar, the “lotus” in Kabir and the ‘flowering forest” in Nanak) The sun-moon swan-pearl sea-water-milk metaphors, allusions to vedic gods, and theology, (A surpassingly beautiful reference to bees in the *Chandogya Upanishad* reads like this “Verily, yonder sun is the honey of the gods. Of this the sky is the cross-beam the atmosphere is the honeycomb; the particles of light are the brood / The hidden teachings [i.e the *Upanishads*], are the honey producers Brahmin is the flower These waters are the nectar.”) and lastly, the fabric of agrarian and wildlife bird-animal images evoking the beautiful, the sensuous, the silent, the erotic, and the sublime mysteries in nature/ experience

Besides the collective Indian poetic conscious other factors like a shared concern with social reform, the mystic desire to transcend physicality and a preoccupation with the inner world further distinguish the face of Bhakti and establish it firmly in the family of world mystic poetry As Sisirkumar Ghose puts it, mysticism and poetry are both forms of homecoming : “Between ‘I am a body’ and ‘I have a body’, lie light years of space-time-consciousness. To turn the prison into a temple, such is the creative effort of poet and mystic alike.” (*Mysticism . Views and Reviews* 4)

Bhakti poetry is also characterised by its similarity of themes If in tenth century Karnataka, the *Lingayat* poet Basavanna (a Shudra) merges the concept of temple with the human body “ My legs are pillars/ the body the shrine / the head a cupola of gold ”; then in the fifteenth century, Pipa the disciple of Ramananda is saying the same thing : “In the body, the Lord is present / The body is His temple / In the body the pilgrimage / of which I am a pilgrim”. Similarly, the aggression with which they debunk idol-worship — be it Basavanna, or Kabir, or Nanak or even Tagore writing in

the nineteenth century, speaks of a shared ideology which contributes to the continuation of the tradition

The other bonding factor of the tradition was its use of the vernacular language for composing religious verse thereby flouting the established norm of composing religious literature in Sanskrit. This decision of the first line of Vaishnava and Shaiva saint-poets, who were Brahmin priests of eighth century Tamil Nadu was implemented with the following motives :

- (a) to relax the rigidity surrounding the Hindu religion and to enable transparency;
- (b) to popularise the role of devotion in temple worship by lending their songs for community singing, thereby inducing larger participation and,
- (c) to ultimately stall the exodus of the lower classes into Jain and Buddhist faiths.

Implementation of the above mentioned measures not only created an egalitarian environment, it also generated a general zeal for reform and established both Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti as forms of worship parallel to the ritual-based worship of the Brahmins. The movement had been initiated by far-sighted Brahmin saint-poets, but it also witnessed the emergence of spiritual and poetic genius from among the Shudras and the skilled-worker classes. Inspired by the divine instinct which saw no discrimination between one man and another, the Bhakti movement, (the movement of the mystics), retained the same spirit of catholicity and the same courage to stand by the truth, as it spread through the country over the next seven centuries.

The Bhakti Movement was, in other words, a human-rights movement against the socio-political tendencies of the state. At its inception, it had rebelled against the caste-ridden system of the brahminised South. Later as it reached Maharashtra, it continued the war with Brahmin orthodoxy and fanaticism. Somewhere midway through, the eleventh century marked the arrival of Islam and the Sufis. The loot and plunder of North- Western states of India initiated by Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century paved the way for successive raids by Arab and Turk invaders. The incursions

were marked by wild killing, loot and plunder. The richly laden temples with idols of gold, silver and precious gems used to be the prime targets.

In the oppressive darkness of the medieval ages, between the pillaging Arab and the caste dominated system, the Bhakti dialogue was a humanising force that gave power to the impoverished seeker and simultaneously got empowered. Tantamount to its handshake with Sufism, the Bhakti cult evolved into the worship of God as *Nirguna* (without form or attributes). This branching out of the *Nirguna* school of poets paid rich dividends in terms of mystic poetry that was subtler, deeper, and radically free of all icon and ritual worship. This is not to say that *Saguna* Bhakti was in anyway inferior. It was largely Vaishnava in character and contributed extensively towards social reform. But the mystics who came in direct contact with the Muslim rulers and who came perhaps closest in the Hindu fusion with Sufism, were the *Nirguna* bhaktas – also called the Sants. The success of both Sant Kabir and Guru Nanak lies in the fact that by rising above the Hindu-Muslim distinctions they attempted to forge a humanistic creed, a non-religion. It is another matter that history saw the dissipation of the Kabir panthis into twelve schools; while the line of Nanak's nominated disciples grew into a new religion called Sikhism. We must not overlook the fact that Sikhism was the child of the Sant tradition: its practical manifestation in changing circumstances, just as the courageous Marathas led by Shivaji were the harvest of the teachings of Sant Ramdas, and Tukaram of the Warkari tradition of Maharashtra. History knows both the Sikhs and the Marathas for their fearless warfare against the Mughals and for their strong character which was watered by the streams of Bhakti poetry and spirituality.

It would not be wrong to say that mysticism in India materialised to its optimum potential in the seventeenth century Sikhs and the Marathas, respectively led by Gobind Singhji and Shivaji. How would a mystic behave in the face of oppressive violence and injustice? Answer: A mystic would perform necessary action, which they did. They performed the

necessary action, in exactly the same spirit that Lord Krishna advocated in his concluding dialogue with Arjuna in the **Bhagvad Gita**

Renunciation of prescribed action
is inappropriate
relinquished in delusion,
it becomes a way of dark inertia

When one passionately relinquishes
difficult action from fear
of bodily harm, he cannot win
the fruit of relinquishment

But if one performs prescribed action
because it must be done,
relinquishing attachment and fruit,
his relinquishment is a lucid art.

He does not disdain unskilled action
nor cling to skilled action;
in his lucidity the relinquisher
is wise and his doubts are cut away
(Tr Barbara Stoler Miller 144)

History and scholarship on the Bhakti movement have tended to study the Bhaktas in isolation or in small groups, so far. As a consequence a major Bhakti poet like Nanak (founder of Sikhism) has been allowed to remain in the Sikh fold, the merit of his verse lost upon Indian literary circles at large. On the one hand, while this thesis has attempted to study Nanak independently as a poet, and establish him in the *Nirguna* Bhakti tradition of Namdev and Kabir, it has on the other hand, also tried to reconstruct the entire Bhakti Movement, and to examine (through the work of Kabir and Nanak) the features of Bhakti in its most evolved stages, to see it in totality as connected and organically growing, and as the earliest modern

ideological phenomenon. By undergoing this exercise the thesis has thus worked around the argument that the reign of poetry is located in both the subtle regions of spirituality and in its immediate ground reality. The Bhakti tradition can also be worded as a tradition of mystic poetry.

The journey has also raised a number of questions which give us some fresh insights into the poetic tradition of India, and the lacunae in Indian poetry in the English language. The questions raised are:

- 1) What was the role of Bhakti poetry and of poets like Kabir and Nanak in Indian history?
- 2) Was Bhakti merely an aesthetic expression arising from the poet's emotional make up?
- 3) Why did the Bhakti movement fail to extend its impact beyond the Medieval period, into the Indian Renaissance (i.e. the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)?
- 4) Why did the fabric of nineteenth century Indian culture (so well fertilised by the Bhakti tradition in its near past), crumble under the British education and culture?
- 5) Why did English literature create such a euphonia among the English educated youth of India, particularly the poets who took to writing in English?
- 6) The segment that counter-reacted to the spread of English education proposed a return to the roots — a revival of Sanskrit, the ancient wisdom of the *Vedas* and Orientalism was proposed. Why is there such scanty mention of the mystic tradition of India which wrote radical verse of reform and change? All these questions the thesis has tried to address in the preceding six chapters and the Appendix.

It is unfortunate that most literary histories make little reference to the rich tradition of vernacular poetry, charged with modern thought and mystic expression of the highest order. The privileged English educated Indian youth of the nineteenth century had obviously not read Kabir or Tukaram, Akho or Nanak, for it was swept off its feet by the English romantics like Keats, Shelley, Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth. It would surely have

appreciated the fact that similar (and even finer) poetry had already existed in its country, in its own language. But an even more unfortunate and ironic aspect of the contemporary scene in Indian English poetry is that it continues to suffer from the same cultural amnesia that afflicted its preceding generation of poets. It pays, to its tradition of poetic genius, mere lip service. Many English departments in Indian universities prescribe for their undergraduate syllabus, the work of European poets in translation. But how many of us have studied the translated work of our own great poets like Nammalvar, Tukaram, Baba Fand, Nanak or Kabir? Or how many of us have studied Aurobindo's writing in English?

The rural, the folk, and the underprivileged classes are areas of experience largely untouched by Indian poetry written in English. The linguistic schism between the regional and the urban (initiated by the British who set up English education academies in urban pockets only -- see Appendix), which led to an ideological distancing, has contributed further to the great gap between the Indian village and the city, that we see today. It has led to poetry losing its power through the division of expression, neglect of folk and native forms of poetry-writing which continue to exist beyond the curtain of urbanity, while the centre proliferates upon its colonised myth of advanced living, cutting itself from the main source of life. Its place has been taken by the popular film songs, music albums and *gaza/s* that are broadcast both on radio and television. However the quality of lyrical poetry in film music, which was quite pathetic in the 1980s and early 1990s, improved somewhat at the turn of the century. There has been a fresh wave of good figurative poetry in many a song, which is heartening. How long this will sustain and whether it will grow into a new dimension altogether, remains to be seen.

At the moment however, we lack a common tradition of poetry/ poets that can thread through the village and the city and back again, in an ongoing dialogue of exchange, nourishing and cementing the nation and its national spirit. It would thereby accomplish approximately the same that the Bhakti

verse-tradition did. It opened up the channels of genuine communication. And it could be set to music too. For that has been the tradition of Indian poetry – it was either chanted or sung. Wild as this proposition may sound to some, it might be the most workable of options for the future of Indian poetry. Perhaps our poets – both those writing in the regional languages and in English – could think of collaborating with the talented singers, lend them their verse for singing, so it lives not only in poetry books, but flows through popular music and fertilises at large the aesthetic and creative sensibilities of the music-loving Indian.

Thus, in brief, the poetry which is the spiritual nerve of a culture is absent in our day-to-day life. It has shrunk in the cities to the printed page in classroom syllabus, small poetry readings, and the drawing-room chatter. In the villages and in some slum-areas on the edge of a city, poetry still breathes through rich folk tradition and community singing – *bhajan*, *kirtan* and folk songs – around the bonfire at night. These however receive poor acknowledgement and media coverage from the mainstream metropolitan culture and academic/publishing industry. The answer to a richer and more meaningful Indian English poetry lies here, in an honest encountering of our regional, national, and English realities — a balancing of our macrocosmic and microcosmic selves.

APPENDIX

No single act of British policy has had such lasting influence on the evolution of modern Indian thought than its decision in 1835 A.D. to use governmental funds to support education in the English language and to adopt the curriculum prevalent in English schools. The introduction of this system of education had two main results. On the one hand it greatly accelerated the diffusion of Western ideas and the Western outlook on life among Indian intellectuals. On the other hand, both the rapid penetration of foreign ways and attitudes, and the publication of the Hindu classics in English translation stimulated movements of defending Hinduism or demanding greater political opportunities for Indians — movements whose leaders often wrote, spoke and thought in English.

Early nineteenth century Calcutta being the capital of East India Company, was most exposed to the glamour of English culture and lifestyle. Calcutta's upper middle classes and middle class gentry aspired to be like the Britishers in their day to day living, clothing, furniture, articles and finally (and most crucially) the English language and the Western Education. Much earlier than the British government's decision to introduce English education, the Hindu college of Calcutta was established in 1816 A.D. for the same purpose, through private efforts (Devendranath Tagore had a hand in its installation). Soon there was in Calcutta an impressive group of young intellectuals and rationalists. Ram Mohan Roy (who later founded the Brahmo Samaj) was one of them. Ram Mohan Roy (b. 1772), was an outspoken foe of Hindu idolatry and superstition and the Brahmo Samaj was a Hindu theistic reform sect. Another brilliant figure of this intellectual period of Calcutta was, the Christian poet and educator, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809 to 1831 A.D.).

English Education

The unique example of Calcutta gave the English some incentive in introducing its long debated upon plan for providing education to the Indians (the urban populace) in both vernacular and English language. Through education the English hoped (i) to produce for themselves cheaply available labour for the offices of the East India

Company and (ii) to create better Indian support (rather better slaves). for themselves. Lord Macaulay's ***Minute On Education*** was accepted as an official policy document by the ruling British government in 1835 A D. The ***Minute*** advocated education through the English language, and recommended English literature as a civilising subject in Indian education.

Efforts by the government to introduce education in the English language in Benaras, Agra, Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Poona, did not take off until after the 1840s, either due to a lack of response among the natives or due to indecision and non-implementation by the government's education committee. Cities like Bombay and Delhi had some resourceful rich Indian families who were keen on their sons acquiring an English education and were even eager to send them to England, for better education. Another source which contributed significantly to the spread of education in India was the presence of the Christian missionaries. The **Church Missionary Society**, the **Bombay Bible Society** and the **London Missionary Society**, meanwhile had established a good number of schools and colleges in South India and the northern belt of India. Later the **American Missionaries** also joined them in the task of spreading education in English along with anglicising and spreading, mostly among the lower classes, the Anglican faith. In some cities English medium academies or schools were also set up by some enthusiastic and resourceful Indians; but their ventures were often known to collapse due to a lack of funds in the long run.

Some of the most distinguished editors and writers of Bengal, who were the products of such English academics were, Kinto Das Pal, Sambhu Chandra Mookerjee, and Romesh Chandra Dutt. While the new-learning made rapid progress in the southern and eastern India, under the triple drive of government, missionary and native influences, a markedly different pattern was taking shape in the "upper India". Many of the circumstances favouring the study of English in Bengal and the Southern peninsula until Bombay-Poona, had just not existed in the north western provinces of India. Until the first half of the nineteenth century when the railroad had not come, the "upper India" was almost shut off from the European culture and the English language. It did not even have the benefit of being on the coastline which would have exposed its populace to the constant influx of European/English sailors and

foreign commodities. The English language in the "upper India" was dead. However, the few Europeans who lived there had acquired a facility with the vernacular language for the purpose of communicating with the natives.

The scene began to change in the later half of the nineteenth century, after the English education committee made a conscious effort to spread English education in the "upper India". The coming of the railroad facilitated its efforts. Obviously English education possessed no appeal for the rural masses whose needs the Government tried to meet through the development of vernacular schools. It was therefore no accident that all of the English schools were situated in urban centres of some size and importance. This linguistic difference must have marked the beginning of the wide gap that exists today between Indian villages and cities.

Nationalism

It is a painful bit of evidence that in its historic past, the people of India as a whole had not been seized with a spirit of aggressive nationalism. The state-wise and regional differences of race, and language, and the fact that the country had most often been divided into small kingdoms had perhaps, further conspired against the emergence of the nationalist sentiment. It is not that all sense of nationality and national feelings among the Indians was dead. But,

Hindu patriotism had never been marked by that narrow, fierce, political grain characteristic of some European nations. Rather it had expressed itself in parochial loyalties, a fond attachment to the ancestral religion and manners. ...Far from being the supreme loyalty, love of country had held third place in the heart of a Hindu, love of religion occupying the first. (McCully *English Education And The Origins Of Indian Nationalism* 93)

Fortunately for India, foreign influences in the nineteenth century, contributed greatly to the genesis of Hindu cultural nationalism. The major twin foreign devices of English education and Christianity had successfully penetrated most districts of the country by the middle of the century. A substantial number of Hindus had been trained under the university system of 1885 A.D. They were a class of rationalist youth who were Hindus at heart and in culture, but neo-British in their thinking and

aspirations. The English culture which they absorbed alienated them from their innermost self and tended to produce even in the best of minds a split personality of the person as educated and the person as a Hindu. By the middle of the nineteenth century, English had eventually dislodged Persian from its towering position, and completely changed the existing language hierarchy. Resentful of its lost status, the Muslim community adamantly sulked and resisted the privileges of an English education while the Hindus (a majority of them), took full advantage of it. Consequently they got ahead in both material and social terms. In the nationalist movement too it was the educated Hindus who occupied the leading positions. The growing gap between the two communities was to translate into intense resentment and insecurity on the part of the Muslims, and eventually lead to the partition of India. Meanwhile, among the English-literate Indians, common education drew the lower and upper strata of the educated class together, and their mutual dislike of the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy, cemented the alliance:

There was another segment of Hindus, who were conservative and brahminical in their thinking. They attacked the study of the English language and accused it of having alienated a whole generation of educated men from all the noble remnants of the ancient Hindu race. They undertook the task of reviving ancient Hindu culture to curb the acceleration of the 'Europeanisation' of India. However, the impact of European thought upon the collective mind of the educated class reawakened the spirit of Hindu India, 'Breath had come into their bones,' as Sir Auckland Colvin remarked, and 'they were about to live and stand upon their feet.' (McCully 242)

The English Language

This in brief is the story of the artificial implanting of English language in the soil of India. It had come sailing to India in the ships of the East India Company as the speech of the shrewd, friendly, white-skinned men, who later took over the entire country. If this foreign language took away from the educated Indians, their originality (of thinking and responding), on the one hand, it gave to them on the other hand, the European sentiment of nationality. As a consequence the country (of the Vedas and Bhakti literature), failed to produce vibrant and great poetry in English (the new language of scholarship and urban communication). But it succeeded in connecting

us with the world, in raising levels of general awareness, and in fanning the sentiments of protest and non co-operation among the people who thereby earned for us our Independence. As McCully says.

If the hand of the foreigner prepared the country from the reception of nationalist dogma, it also moulded the context of early nationalist thought.....The liberal nationalists of India – the Banerjees, the Naorojis, the Mehtas, the Ghoses, and others – invented little of their own ideology. Their contribution [lay] ..in expounding a modified version of doctrines which they had picked up as students..(388-389)

Today, the English language has come a long way. From *British* English to *Pidgin* English, we now have our own variety of Indian English, which manages commendably to convey to the reader the scent of rain on the Indian soil and the music of the *koel* (cuckoo) among ripe mango branches; through its modified syntax and new word coinages. The experiment has just begun, with some Indian novelists like Raja Rao and Salman Rushdie, showing us the way.

The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century saw the pre-independence struggle of India emerge from the grass roots and climb the pinnacle of success. It was an age of great socio-political ferment, of radical thinking and of a process of the self-reckoning of an entire nation that rose to epical dimensions of character and courage. Such times should normally have given us great and heroic poetry as well. And they probably did – in the vernacular languages of India, but not in the English language which our educated class of Indians had so fondly embraced. Even the vernacular languages were irresistibly drawn to associate and involve themselves with the English language and literature. As Sisir Kumar Das writes in *A History Of Indian Literature*, Volume VIII :

The relative prestige of the Indian languages among themselves was partly determined, by the extent to which they were influenced by English. The concept of modernity in literary history was also related to the relation that each Indian language and literature developed with English. The English educated Indian too, equally scornful of these vernaculars, remained indifferent to them....
(30-31).

The process of colonisation was completed.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY

Abhanga : A Marathi metre, also any metrical composition in this metre. The *abhanga* is the favourite metre of all *Warkari* poets since the thirteenth century and unlike classical Sanskrit-based metres it is native to Marathi speech and its colloquial forms. It is extremely flexible.

Allah : The Muslim and Arabic name of God.

Alvar : A saint-poet devoted to Lord Vishnu. Tradition recognizes twelve alvars between the sixth and the ninth centuries in the Tamil-speaking regions of south India, of whom Nammalvar is the best known.

Arti : Ritualistic Hindu prayer-service in which incense-sticks and flowers are offered to the divine accompanied with devotional singing and music.

Atman: Meaning the “self”, also translated as the “soul” or “spirit,” it is the innermost reality of a person, the animate and spiritual principle of life, not to be confused with gross individuality.

Avatarvada : The concept of reincarnation.

Bani : Language or speech.

Bhagvad Gita : Often also referred to in the abbreviated form as “the *Gita*”: the “song of the Lord” that depicts the celebrated dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna during the *Mahabharata* war and a section of the *Bhishmaparva*, a chapter of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*.

Bhajan : Devotional singing.

Bhakti : From the Sanskrit root "bhaj," to share, from which is also derived the word "bhagvat," Lord. Here it is used to convey the sentiment of single-minded devotion, and the condition of the whole being of a devotee (bhakta,) whose mind and body are totally absorbed in the object of his worship and remain continually directed or oriented towards it. The object of such worship could be an anthropomorphic deity, a symbol, a name, an image, a concept, an abstraction, or the non-discursive or inconceivable "whole being" itself

Bhakti-Marga : Marga means the "way", "path" or "method". The term refers to the path of devotion, or rather to devotion as the means to achieving God

Bhakti Rasa : The term "rasa" in classical Sanskrit poetics means the predominant sentiment or emotion, the active feeling, in a particular work of art or activity. Here it would literally mean "the juice of Bhakti" or "(the uninterrupted flow of) the feeling of devotion".

Brahman : Infinite spirit. Usually translated as the "absolute", in the *Vedic* literature it means "prayer", or the power of the ritual word. In the *Vedanta* however, it comes to mean "the ultimate reality underlying the phenomenal existence that is vast, unqualified and imperishable." The infinite spirit is etymologically related to Brahma, the cosmic creator; they are differentiated in Sanskrit by gender, the infinite being neuter, the creator masculine.

Brahmin : The highest of the four castes of Hindu society, this priestly caste is considered pure and chaste. It enjoys an exclusive and privileged access to the scriptures – their recitation, interpretation, teaching and their use in conducting a religious ceremony.

Chandala : A group from among the outcaste section of society.

Daswandh : See page 175.

Fakeer : An Arabic word for a wandering ascetic.

Gaddi : A "seat of position". Literally however it would mean a "cushion used for sitting".

Gayatri : It is known as the most sacred mantra of the *Rig Veda*. The Brahmins have a sacred duty to recite it morning and evening.

Gazal : The rendering of romantic and soulful poetry in a specialized form of singing. Gazal-singing comes from the Islamic culture and its lyrics are set in the Urdu language.

Gopala : It means "cowherd" or "Cow-protector", and is a name popularly used to address the Lord Krishna. Gopala is thus God, the cowherd and his *Bhaktas*, His fellow cowherds. The cows signify the five senses and the cowherd the self that protects them.

Guna : It signifies the three qualities inherent in nature. Each of these three qualities collectively constitute nature. They are: lucidity (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*), and dark inertia (*tamas*). Together they form the basis of every aspect of phenomenal existence. For instance, the temperament of each individual depends upon the ratio in which these qualities (or "humours," as Dr. Johnson calls them in his play *Volpone*,) prevail within him or her.

Guru : Teacher or spiritual guide.

Hari : Another name for Vishnu, Hari literally means "fawn-coloured" and in this sense is perhaps synonymous with "Pandurang", used as another

name for Vitthal by Tukaram and other Marathi poet-saints, and sometimes by Kabir, Nanak and the other Sant poets.

Hatha-yoga : Developed by the Hindu teachers. Hatha yoga is a minutely detailed literal and symbolic anatomy of the body. It is a technique for attaining liberation through physical postures and breathing exercises, often combined with meditation and austerities.

Haumai : Egoism. Self-pride. A Persian word re-interpreted by Nanak.

Hukam : Divine will.

Jaziya : A tax paid by the non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim ruler.

Kirtana : The singing of religious songs with devotional fervour.

Krishna : "The dark one". One of the three (Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha,) human *avatars* — reincarnations — of Vishnu. The divine charioteer and guru of Arjuna who helped him recover his nerve and overcome his self-conflict on the battlefield in the war in the ***Mahabharata***.

Linga : The phallic symbol of Lord Shiva worshipped largely by the shaivites.

Lingayats : Those who wear the "linga".

Maya : It signifies the power of creative illusion and magic. It is derived from the Sanskrit root *ma*, which means "to measure", "to form". Maya in the philosophical context refers to the phenomenal universe, the ephemera of transient forms. As these forms are always changing, going in and out of existence, they are illusory. But Maya is also power — the power of bringing into form, the power of giving shape to desire. In Bhakti literature, Maya is often personified as a powerful

female, who misleads people into craving and confusion

Mlechchha : "impure" or sullied A common usage among the Brahmins in the past, while referring to those belonging to a lower caste, particularly the invading Muslims.

Mullah . A Muslim priest

Nirguna . Throughout Indian religious history, *saguna* and *nirguna* designate two major modes of conceiving God or ultimate truth. *Saguna* is the concept which perceives God as one having physical form and/ or attributes. *Nirguna* is the concept which perceives God as unmanifest, formless, and as an experience that is beyond the limits of human expression

Om . A word and symbol of power, in Hindu mysticism. Om unfolds the finer sensibility and perception. It stands for cosmic harmony and presents the rhythm deeply underlying the spirit. See page 172-173.

Pauri : A Punjabi word meaning, a stanza.

Puranas : General name given to collections of Hindu myths in Sanskrit; for example, the Bhagavat Purana contains the stories of Krishna's life on earth and the principles of Krishna Bhakti. Purana means old.

Puranic : Belonging to the Puranas.

Qawwali : An form of singing which has its origins in the Sufi school of mysticism . It generally has two participants who take the song forward through a series of questions and answers.

Qazi : A Muslim legal expert.

Raga : A raga is a unit of musical-notes whose arrangement is exclusive to it.

There are several ragas in the Indian system of classical music. The saint-poets of medieval India were in the habit of rendering and singing their compositions in a particular raga.

Ram : In Hinduism, the name of the seventh avatar of Vishnu, King of Ayodhya, hero of the **Ramayana** epic. In Bhakti literature, "Ram" is more often used as a synonym for God than as a specific reference to the Hindu deity of **Ramayana**.

Ragis : Singers of the Sikh community who sing kirtan based on verses from the Granth Saheb. Since the compositions are based upon (and sung in) particular ragas their singers are called Ragis.

Rhababis : Practising Muslims who sing kirtan based on the *Gurbani* verses.

Rishi : Sage, an ascetic of the highest order

Saguna . The school of Bhakti which advocates God as manifest. The *saguna* manifestations of God being the familiar deities of Hindu mythology, especially the chief incarnations of Vishnu, Ram, and Krishna.

Sahaj : That which is "simultaneously arisen" or "co-emergent". *Sahaj* is a paradoxical state of being in which the physical/ material world and the spiritual world are experienced simultaneously, and hence (in so far as they represent duality,) they erase each other.

Sakhi : Stories surrounding the lives of the saint-poets, myths that are partly fact and partly fiction.

Samadhi : Spiritual state in which the meditating person loses all consciousness of the material world.

Sant : A saint.

Shabad : Literally the term means, "word". Here in the chapter on Nanak, it refers to the singing of devotional compositions, taken mostly from the Sant and Bhakti literature. Shabad-singing lays more stress upon the word and its meaning. See page 108-109.

Shaiva : Those who worship the Shiva the Lord of destruction.

Shloka : A couplet

Shudra The last of the four main caste divisions of Hindu society. The Shudras were denied access to a temple in the past.

Tantrism : A religious cult. Tantrism brought the sublime conceptions of the **Upanishads** and the stark ideals of early Buddhism down to earth, making the body the proving ground for theories about reality and liberation. It radically tested the concept of non-duality, insisting that the individual body/mind, far from being a mere obstacle to overcome, was the vehicle and revealer of enlightenment, was enlightenment itself.

Ulatbamsi : A particularly intriguing category of Kabir's poems written in an "upside-down language," which uses subversive linguistic techniques to express ideas that otherwise would be difficult to express and articulate. The *ulatbamsi* poems in "upside-down language" intrigue because they are "absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable" and yet keenly intuitive and meaningful. Kabir's *ulatbamsi* poems are part of a long tradition in India. They have their genesis in the systems of Tantrism and Hatha yoga.

Ulema : A Muslim theologian.

Upanishad : Is derived from the Sanskrit root *upa* (near), *ni* (down), and *sad* (to sit), i.e. "to sit down near". Groups of pupils would sit near the teacher to learn from him the secret doctrine, while the seer

on his part adopted a certain reticence in communicating the truth. Upanishad became a name for a mystery, a secret communicated only to the tested few, who after receiving the knowledge were released from ignorance. The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas. They represent the central aim and meaning of the teachings of the Vedas.

Vaishnava : One who worships the Lord Vishnu.

Vaishyas : The third of the four castes of Hindu society. The first two being, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas.

Veda : The body of ancient hymns and ancillary liturgical texts preserved in an oral tradition by the priestly (Brahmin) class. The four Vedas are : Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva.

Virashaiva : Militant or heroic shaivism. The Virashaivas are also commonly known as *lingayats* — those who wear the “*linga*”, the auspicious symbol of Shiva, in a string tied around their necks

Vishnu : One of the three major Hindu deities. Vishnu is the Lord who preserves and nurtures the universe. The other two deities are Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer. All the three personify the three phenomenal forces of existence.

Vithoba : Vitthal, another name for the deity Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu,) as he is worshipped in Maharashtra in the region of Pandharpur. The origin of the name Vitthal/ Vithoba is obscure.

Warkari : One who makes a “*wart*”, which in Marathi means, “round trip” or “pilgrimage” or “regular visit to a place and return from it.” A *Warkari* is committed to undertaking a pilgrimage to Pandharpur twice every year, on the festivals of *Ashadhi* and the *Kartiki*.

Yama The Hindu God of death.

Yoga One of the six major schools of philosophy in ancient India Its Sanskrit root is *yuj*, "to yoke" oneself to the divine purpose through discipline. Yoga is a codified system of practical discipline that can take one towards liberation.

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THE CONTEXT OF BHAKTI POETRY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA
Its Inception, Cultural Encounter And Impact

With Reference to the Work of Kabir and Nanak

Neeti M. Sadarangani

2001

INDIA IN INDO-CARIBBEAN CANADIAN WRITING
THE CASE OF SASENARINE PERSAUD

SUMMARY
OF
DOCTORAL RESEARCH DISSERTATION
To be submitted to
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The argument of the Ph. D. research entitled “India in Indo-Canadian Caribbean Writing: The Case of Sassenarine Persaud” is presented in an outline as follows:

CHAPTER I.: THE INDO-CARIBBEAN PRESENCE IN CANADA.

The chapter presents a historical perspective on the twice-exiled Indo-Caribbeans in Canada that leads them to their present predicament. It focuses on their psychic conditions as expressed in the writings of Indo-Caribbean writers like Cyril Dabydeen, Neil Bissoondath, Sam Selvon, Arnold Harrichand Itwaru, Sassenarine Persaud, and others. It also attempts to derive an operative significance of the memory of India in the psyche and artistic sensibility of Indo-Caribbean expatriate writers. It views that their memory got formulated as a result of the Hindu samskaras that came down to them through their personal memory and the collective memory of the diaspora they belong to.

CHAPTER II. PERSAUD’S VIEWS ON “YOGIC REALISM”:

The chapter seeks first to explain the Indian world-view based on the concept of yoga as it emerges from the classics like Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutram* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Based on these texts, an attempt is made to work out a concept of the Indian mind. The chapter then reviews Sassenarine Persaud’s life and vision that shape his literary aspiration and expression, particularly with the help of the essays in which he discusses these ideas. It, thus, provides a structure to carry out a review of Persaud’s works and his world-view. The chapter also explains Persaud’s theory of “Yogic Realism” to help further discussion on his literary works.

CHAPTER III : HINDU PERSONA IN DOUBLE EXILE :

The chapter traces cultural evolution of a Hindu (Indian) person in double exile in the four books of Persaud, first from “comfort” to “companionship” and then from “companionship”

to “confidence”, as defined in the previous chapter. This quest is of a prime concern among his protagonists who are in exile from their mother culture of India. While section I discusses two novels, *Dear Death* (1989) and *The Ghost of Bellow's Man* (1992), section II examines Persaud's stories in his collection, *Canada Geese and Apple Chatney* (1998).

CHAPTER IV: YOGIC REALISM: THE POETIC WAY

The chapter attempts to analyse Persaud's poems in his collection, *Damarary Telepathy* (1989). The poems explain the poet's choice to withdraw from the world in the west and to concentrate on telepathic links with Indian spiritualism. It inspires him, he says, to liberate his self and elevate it to realise the world of the yogic realism. It also discusses Persaud's second book of poetry, *The Wintering Kundalini* (2002). The poems in this collection voice the poet's regretful apprehension of the reality in Canada. The poet views that it hampers a person's efforts for evolution of self by cooling down the kundalini, the centre of energy in his body with chilly cold, snow and glitter. An attempt is made to view these two realities as juxtaposing to each other to work adversely on a person's mind. The poet views poetry as potent means to survive these depressing conditions and continue with efforts for evolution of self.

CHAPTER V: YOGIC REALISM – THE POETIC TRILOGY

The chapter discusses Persaud's second book of poetry, *A Surf of Sparrow's Song* (1996) with reference to his theory of ‘Yogic Realism’ as explained in chapter II of the thesis. With the help of some poems, an attempt is made to take the reader on a metaphorical journey that one's soul takes to reach the heights of the yogic realism as propounded by Persaud. It also attempts to analyse the poetic experimentation done by Persaud for evoking the experience. The chapter elaborates Persaud's concepts of ‘writing as yoga’, his analogy of writing with

the Indian music and the 'yogic realism' as they operate in his poetry. It also discusses Persaud's two other books of poetry, *The Hungry Sailor* (2000) and *A Writer Like* (2002). Persaud views the poems in these collections as poetic revelations of a writer's yogic journey unfolding different layers of his three layered perception that began with his sentimental view of the world followed by his critical view of the world leading finally to his yogic view of the world. The goal of the journey is the image 'a writer like you' that he aspires to unite with. The journey is not over, yet vision is clear. Persaud's poetic journey reaches a stage of understanding that he has to follow the vision in order to reach the ultimate goal that is the yoga, the union of the two, a writer-yogi and the 'A Writer like You'. The chapter presents a reading of Persaud's yogic journey through poetry in the light of the system of yoga as laid down in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutram*.

